

THE DOORSTEP MURDERS



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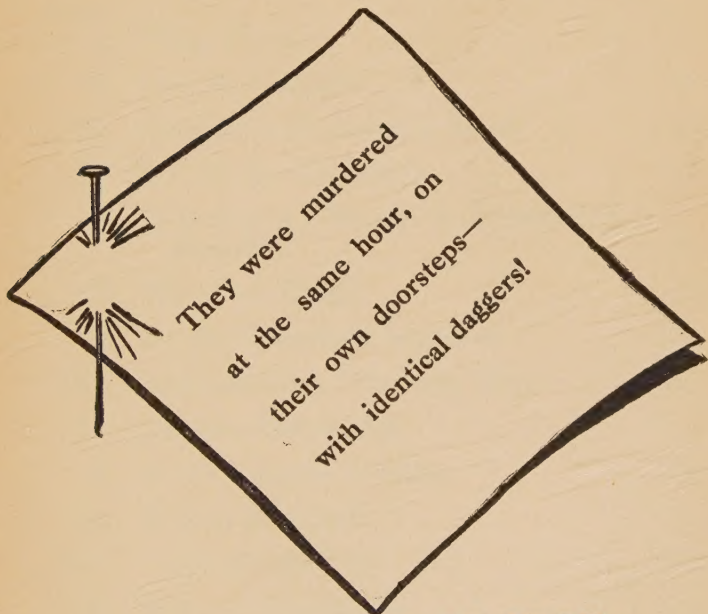
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THE DOORSTEP MURDERS

A KENNETH CARLISLE DETECTIVE STORY

By Carolyn Wells



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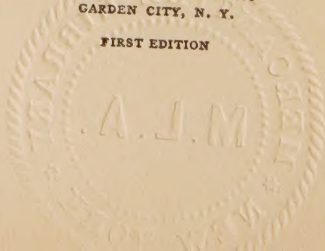
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THE DOORSTEP MURDERS

CHAPTER I

POKER FACES

IT WAS when the village fathers of Connecticut found names for their new settlements by searching the Scriptures that the balmy name of Gilead was bestowed upon a tiny hamlet in the western end of the long state.

Though perhaps no more pious than Canaan or Goshen or Sharon, it was probably no less so, although it had succumbed in some ways to the influence of modern times and many inventions.

One charm, however, it had retained in all its pristine beauty, and that was the village green. Long, oval-shaped, and well-kept as to grass and paths, it occupied the center of the village, and its waving "wine-glass" elms were the glory of the inhabitants, both old and newcomers.

On the outskirts of the little town were country clubs, riding clubs, even a new archery range, but in the heart of the village lay the revered green, and few dared or cared to misuse its shaded walks and comfortable settees. Paths criss-crossed it and the best and finest houses were grouped about it.

About in the middle of its length across the street on the south side was a business block, whereon stood the drug store with its stock of books, toys, and knick-knacks, the post office, the rather imposing Town Hall, and the inn. The last, rejoicing in the frankly ostentatious name of Top Hole Inn, was a long three-storied structure, with much expanse of railed veranda dotted with big wicker rocking chairs.

It was not like an English inn, in fact it was not like an inn at all, being more suggestive of a commodious country home to which additions had been made as circumstances required. Transients took rooms, of course, but families had suites or apartments, to which they returned summer after summer. For though Gilead itself was furiously hot in the dog-days, there were cool spots off toward the lake or up on the hills, which were seemingly left-overs of the Berkshires.

The front doors of the inn opened into a great hall with hospitable fireplace and further relays of rocking chairs. A booking desk in one corner and a green baize bulletin board gave the only effects of hotel life, and fresh dimity curtains and chintz-covered lounges betokened a tidy and tasteful housekeeper.

One of the suites on the ground floor belonged to Dr. Sherrill, a summer resident only, and greatly unwelcome to the all-the-year-round practitioner, old Dr. Forman. But many of Dr. Sherrill's city pa-

tients were summer visitors or householders in Gilead, and, too, the pleasant-mannered physician easily made new friends.

One night, just after the middle of October, he was sitting on the veranda of the inn, awaiting some visitors. He was a firm believer in the dullness that all work and no play is said to contribute to the life of the average human being. And he felt that the average human being's life is quite dull enough without any additional influences thereto. Wherefore he played as often and as variedly as he could manage it. He was an enthusiastic golfer and tennis player, a keen fisherman, and a good shot, and when the day was done he was always ready for a hand at bridge or a game of poker. And Saturday night, by all the laws of the Medes and Persians, was set aside for poker as religiously as the Druids observed their classic rites.

Six men played together every Saturday night, and though occasionally one or another was unavoidably absent the game went on regularly. The play was always at the home of Dr. Sherrill, in his cozy sitting room, a colorful place in contrast to his austere and whitely furnished offices. But the doctor sat on the veranda to welcome his guests and his bulky figure comfortably filled one of the big rockers.

Of less than average height, the physician was of more than average weight, and though he preached

various diet rules to his patients he observed none of them himself. So, like the aged, aged man a-sitting on a gate, he kept on from day to day growing a little fatter. True, he often formed intentions of cutting out starches and sweets, but as is well known, to-morrow is the day to begin to reduce, and so the doctor kept on waiting for a to-morrow that never came.

More impressive, however, than his rounded figure was his striking face. Red and rosy were his cheeks, crimson his full lips, and his abundant hair and heavy mustache were of the tint known as brick red, though really of a veritable flame color. Not auburn or Titian, but a brilliant, glowing red that made it impossible for the startled stranger, observing him for the first time, to take his eyes off it.

Entirely unashamed of his hirsute coloring, in fact the doctor rather gloried in it; and he twinkled with amusement when, as he expressed it, he knocked somebody galley-west. The galley-west knocking was aided and abetted by his rather light, china blue eyes, which from beneath heavy red eyebrows could glower like a pirate's. And, though usually mild and even-tempered, Dr. Luther Sherrill, if roused, would glower like a pirate and swear like one, too.

As a man turned in at the inn, Dr. Sherrill rose to greet him. Standing, the doctor showed even more clearly his excess of girth and lack of height. He was garbed in white flannels, which, though sounding

simple enough, were really conspicuous because of their exaggerated cut and flare. His tie was of a pronounced green, and a peeping handkerchief matched in color.

Self-satisfaction beamed from his blue eyes and even seemed to radiate from his red hair as he welcomed his guest.

"Hello, Carman, hello, hello. Drop into this chair and wait for the rest. How are you? . . . Fine, of course. . . . Fine—fine."

"Fine, yes. Always am. Sorry the season's so far along. Hate to go back to the city."

"West later?"

"Yes, after I attend to some matters in New York. Troublesome bits, too. Oh, well, the world's full of ups and downs."

John Carman swung into a chair with the same large, free motion he would use in mounting a horse. He had lived much in the West, his was a show ranch though not a dude ranch. And for many years he had been sheriff—of a district in Wyoming where the job of sheriff was not an enviable one. Tall, gaunt, loose-limbed, yet not without a certain grace of movement, he was not at his best in civilian togs. He needed chaps and a few bits of Indian beadwork to give him his picturesque due. Also, a horse under him. His face was rugged, strong, and, unless he willed otherwise, absolutely devoid of expression. His family,

especially his daughter, Peggy, read kindness and devotion in that face, but to most people it was as a closed book.

He looked anxious, mentally tired, and the doctor wondered what he was worrying about. But he knew better than to ask. Few asked questions of John Carman.

"Don't wonder you hate to go," Sherrill said, conversationally. "Your place is at its best now. Autumn foliage suits your shingled house. I'll bet Miss Kate hates to leave. Doesn't she, now? Miss Kate?"

"Kate? Oh, yes, she hates to go from here, but she loves the West. Always ready to go back there. Peggy, too. Though the child has friends here."

"Peggy? I should say she had! She'll never want for friends! What a girl! What a girl!"

"Yes, a great girl," said Peggy's father, his hard, deep blue eyes softening at thought of his idolized child. The change in those harsh eyes changed his whole face, and the sheriff from Wyoming Bad Lands became a gentle, tender-hearted, fatherly sort, with a smile of general good will.

And then Nichols came. Montcalm Nichols, the well-known criminal lawyer, former judge and one-time district attorney, whose will power and determination had sent more than one evil doer out of the world, either to imprisonment within four walls or

beneath six feet of earth. A powerful personality, an obstinate, dictatorial nature, he ruled all with whom he came in contact, or else he broke the contact. He ruled his unattractive, uninitiative daughter, Anne, also his young and more spirited wife, Phyllis.

His second wife Phyllis was not Anne's mother, who had died years ago. As a result of Montcalm's tyranny, some said. But even those rumors did not deter beautiful Phyllis Somers from marrying the tyrant, and now, after a year or so, rumor was again busy with hints of marital infelicity.

But as Kate Carman declared, an angel from heaven couldn't live with that Nichols man, he was simply insufferable.

Yet others disagreed with this dictum and opined that Phyllis Nichols was very far from being an angel and that the shoe was on the other foot.

In appearance Nichols was a man of culture and intellect. Well-groomed, well-dressed, always courteous, good-looking and good-natured, he concealed his iron fist in his velvet glove, but held it ready for instant use.

He ran up the inn steps and took a chair beside the railing.

"Good to be here early," he said, smiling. "I love to see the citizens stroll by. Almost like Shepherd's at Cairo."

"Not a bit like it," contradicted Carman.

"No, not really," Nichols agreed. "I didn't mean it, of course. And yet, why isn't it the same? We sit here, on a piazza, there on a terrace, but in both cases we watch the populace throng by—with a due regard for the difference in numbers——"

"Yes," laughed the doctor, "a slight variance that way, slight. Say, here three pass in ten minutes, there, three thousand in the same time."

"About that," Nichols nodded. "But that's merely a difference in degree, not in kind."

"And there's no difference in kind?" asked Carman, his blue eyes twinkling.

"No," declared Nichols, "not a bit. Both lots are human beings, full of human vanities, foibles, frailties, and crimes."

"Full, too," Carman added, "of generous impulses, kind hearts, and sacrificing souls."

"One half of one per cent. of those," Nichols sneered, "and the rest my selection. A crowd is a crowd, Carman, and their hidden motives are seldom good ones."

"Glittering generalities," said Sherrill, lightly. "An utterly futile argument. Your statements, gentlemen, are incapable of proof, and I refuse to listen to any more of them. Thank goodness I see three black crows approaching and they are right welcome."

One short, straight path cut off a segment of the western end of the long green. At the southern outlet

of that path was the inn. At the northern end of the same path, across the road, was the home of Antony Dane. And along that path, nearing the inn, came Dane and his two nephews, Bob Phillips and Guy Lawson.

Dane was the richest man in town, and was thought by many to be the finest as well. But not everybody agreed to the second argument. A big man, with an especially large face. One of those faces that seem to be just a plump oval of flesh with some features hastily tucked in. Smooth-shaven, but with crisply curly gray hair that was always in place, and, on a woman, would have seemed to be a very well-done marcel. His eyes were gray, too, and shrewd, with quick glances of interest or disapproval, as quickly fading to indifference.

The two young men on either side of Antony Dane were, like their uncle, in dinner clothes, and all three carried light-weight topcoats over their arms.

Dane was punctilious in matters of etiquette and inexorable in matters of routine. It was his habit to have his two nephews with him always at dinner Saturday nights, and important indeed must be another engagement that would prevent their attendance. Young Phillips, who lived with his uncle, was free to dine where he liked the rest of the week, but Saturday must be observed. Guy Lawson, the other nephew, lived at the other end of the green, but he,

too, was invariably his uncle's guest Saturday nights at dinner.

Then, after dinner, the three went over to Dr. Sherrill's for the inevitable poker game, which lasted until midnight or a bit later, and then the young men were free for another week.

Not that they chafed at this arrangement, but they sometimes wished Dane had chosen some other evening, for Saturday was by way of being a general gala night and they were popular with the younger generation.

As different as day and night, Phillips, the one who lived with his uncle, was known as Rosebud Rob, and the nickname carried with it no hint of effeminacy. It came about because Bob was seldom seen without a rosebud in his buttonhole, a whim that had become a habit because of the chaff it had called forth.

Bob was a little inclined to be perverse, and loved to do what was not expected of him. Also he had sudden and determined impulses to take important steps, to get married, to go abroad, to become an aviator—all such undertakings—but invariably his inclinations faded, his purposes fizzled out, and he never did any of the things. His uncle laughed good-humoredly and let the lad go his own way. The two lived alone in the big house, with a lot of servants, and not infrequently guests.

Antony Dane sometimes declared he was a connoisseur of comfort and an epicure of ease. This was true; he arranged his home and appointments with an eye single to his own physical comfort, which, incidentally, included Bob's.

Guy Lawson, the other nephew, could have lived at Danewood also, but he said the life there was too sybaritic for him. He preferred a little more sitting up straight, as he called it, and he had rooms with a kindly, capable woman in her pleasant house at the other end of the green.

Lawson was about thirty-five, six years older than Phillips, and far less of a society man. Rather of the patient, plodding type, and deeply interested in his chosen profession of architecture. He easily made enough from this to support himself, both by drawing plans and by writing articles for the journals. But he spent much time in evolving marvelous ideas for edifices of great beauty which never did and never were intended to materialize. Quiet, undemonstrative, even absent-minded, Guy kept his way an even tenor for the most part; the exceptions being, when the mood took him, to spend wild evenings at a dance hall or road house in company with hilarious companions. Such gayeties seemed to refresh him, and as their effect lasted for some weeks they were not of over-frequent occurrence. His uncle did not disapprove, but rather encouraged the pleasure seeking.

A fine-looking chap, Lawson was, even picturesque, by reason of his very white skin and very black hair. He wore also a small pointed black beard and a black mustache, so, with heavy black eyebrows above deep-set gray eyes, his face was a model for an artist. But he was entirely free from personal vanity, and proved this by a gold cap on an eye tooth, a jarring note that anyone who cared for appearance would have avoided. Of average size and strength, good at outdoor games and a perfect dancer, Guy was a general favorite and was beset with invitations, which he independently accepted or did not, as he chose.

He always enjoyed the Saturday-night poker party and also liked going to his uncle's to dinner first. He sometimes said that Uncle Antony was all right but a little of him went a long way. How Bob could stick it to live there he couldn't understand.

Yet Bob Phillips was well satisfied. His business ventures were spasmodic and unsuccessful, so as a rule he was taken care of by his uncle between engagements. Dane didn't care, however, so long as Bob caused him no inconvenience, and in general the three relatives were harmonious.

To-night, as they crossed the green, laughing and chatting, they seemed all of an age and almost like three college lads out for a lark.

"Hurry up," called out Dr. Sherrill, as they neared the inn. "It's getting late in the season. Not many

more of these orgies of ours. Come on in, we must lose no time."

He led the way, and all six of the men went along the veranda to the door which opened directly into the doctor's suite.

The sitting room, made ready for them, had its large center table cleared and set out with cards and chips. The lights were just right, the wood fire glowed pleasantly, and satisfactory chairs were in place.

The play began shortly, and went on, with varying fortunes to one or another with the fall of the cards.

"It's the last of these parties for me," said John Carman, in an interval of rest and refreshment. "I'm going for good the early part of next week. You'll have to carry on without me."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Phillips, in a tone of dismay. "Not that I'm broken-hearted over your loss, old man, but I don't want to lose Peggy from our midst."

Carman looked a bit annoyed at this informal reference to his daughter and returned, a little stiffly:

"Oh, the girl's glad to go. She's rather fed up with this imitation country life. She longs for the ranch and the horses."

"I want free life and I want fresh air, and Lasca, down by the river Dee, or wherever he was," quoted Montcalm Nichols, gayly.

"Down by the Brandywine, wasn't it?" asked Dane, looking idiotic on purpose.

"No," said Guy, seriously, "it was down by the Rio Grande," and they all chaffed him on his erudition.

Quiet and unannoyed, Lawson went on: "Sudden decision, Carman? I thought you were staying through October."

"I did intend to, but some matters have turned up that must be attended to. I may have to return here for a few days—and maybe not."

He left the situation thus in the air, and they all picked up the cards again.

It was well after midnight when Phillips made the first suggestion of going home.

"I thought," his uncle said, "we'd stay a bit later to-night as it's getting toward the end of the run."

"You can," Rosebud Rob returned, fingering the small pink blossom yet fresh on his lapel. "But I've the very devil of an ulcerated tooth, and I'm going to slide."

"Why didn't you yell sooner?" asked the doctor, sympathetically. "I'll fix you up."

"No," said Bob, determinedly, "I'd rather go home. I've drops there the dentist gave me. He's treating it. It's something fierce, but I won't mix the prescriptions. You can jolly well stay awhile, Uncle Tony. I'll just run along."

"Oh, well, we'll have one more round or so," agreed Dane.

"I want to go soon," Lawson told them. "I—I'm——"

"I know," laughed Bob. "Guy's going to a night club! I can always tell by his apologetic air!"

"Well, what if I am?" and Lawson braved the shouts of the crowd. "Why shouldn't I? Anybody want to go with me?"

"I'd go in a minute but for this nuisance," Bob declared, his hand clasping his swelling cheek.

No one else volunteered to go, but Dane said, "Oh, well, I guess we'll call it a night, then."

"Yes," agreed Carman, "I'm for getting along. And I may be up here a week from to-night. If so, I'll sit in."

"Your important business be settled up by that time?" Lawson asked, casually.

"I hope so. But it means communications with my Western office——"

"Western communications corrupt good manners," sang out the irrepressible Bob, and Carman nodded a smiling assent.

There was more or less chaff and some handshaking and good-nights, and then Dr. Sherrill opened his front door and stepped out on the veranda with his guests.

A beautiful night, clear and cool, no moon, but myriads of bright stars. Lawson, always with an eye for the beautiful, stood looking across the green

to where the village church raised its white Colonial spire.

"How a church does add to the scenery," said Phillips, noting the other's gaze.

"Yes," Guy said, "but it's all fine. The green with its trees, and the houses beyond, and the hills for a background, and the white road disappearing in the distance——"

"In the general direction of the Small Hours Club, as you may say," put in his uncle.

"Yes, in that general direction," Guy laughed back, "and for me it's a specific direction, which I shall proceed to follow. Good-night, everybody. Good-night, Uncle Tony. Hope your tooth lets up, Bobs."

They all trooped down the steps and stood in a group for a minute as Lawson whistled for a taxicab.

For Gilead, though an old town, was modern enough in some ways, and if it possessed but few taxicabs they were good ones and available when wanted.

A cheerful-looking red one drew up to the curb, and as Guy got in he said to the driver, "Stop at the drug store first, and then out to the Small Hours Club."

"Happy days," Bob called out, and immediately betook himself across the green to his uncle's house.

"I'll walk around the long way," Antony Dane said to the other two men.

"Come on," Carman invited. "Want to stop in at my house?"

"No, not to-night. Pretty late."

"Go on around with me," Nichols put in. "I'll be lonesome."

The short path across the green from the inn to Dane's place was only a few moments' walk. But to go round the whole length of the green meant fifteen or twenty minutes at least. Going to the right, when leaving the inn, one passed first the post office, then the Town Hall, then the drug store, and on the next block arrived at Carman's home.

All this on the south side of the green. Turning around the end of the long oval, a pedestrian would pass the house where Guy Lawson lived, and several others, all pleasant and attractive homes. Then rounding the end, one went along the north side of the green, where the finest houses were to be found. This main road along the green showed, for the most part, darkened homes, and at one of them Nichols and Dane parted company. This was Nichols's house, an imposing affair of turrets and gables.

"Come in," he said, hospitably, but Dane declined, saying it was late enough to be bedtime.

Alone, then, the last of the three home goers, Antony Dane reached his own beautiful and comfortable rooftree and went up the front steps.

CHAPTER II

ON ONE DOORSTEP

ON SUNDAY morning a farmer came into Gilead with his load of milk cans. Few in the village chose bottled milk, however fine, if they could get milk from old Preedik. He had supplied the people for generations, and sometimes pointed with pride to grown men who as babies had thrived on his pure and fresh milk. When the onward march of progress had forced him to discard his old horse and older wagon he had acquired a motor vehicle of sorts and now rattled into town instead of lumbering in.

Eliphalet the man had presumably been christened, but Liff he was called by everybody. Long and gaunt, he was a typical farmer, though his face was remindful of the prophets as painted by the great artists; Isaiah for choice, but his prosaic costume spoiled the full resemblance.

It was Preedik's habit to come into town singing a hymn, and on this particular Sunday morning he was rolling forth the sonorous melody of,

*'Twas on that dark, that dreadful night,
When powers of Death and Hell arose.*

This was far from cheerful, it must be admitted, but after all it was not quite so depressing as his other favorite:

*Hark, from the tombs a doleful sound;
Mine ears, attend the cry.
Ye mortal men, come view the ground
Where ye must shortly lie.*

But owing to repeated and emphatic requests from would-be sleepers, Liff had been induced to cut short his musical efforts as he arrived at the first of the houses of the village.

The morning was so bright and clear-cut that everything stood out in its own color. The church was of a dazzling white, the trees of the most brilliant red and gold and russet, the sky was the deepest, purest blue and the numerous flower beds were bright with scarlet salvia and yellow goldenglow. An average artist painting the scene would doubtless have toned it down to pastel shades, for only a genius could have reproduced those true values without having his picture look like a chromo.

But color schemes and scenery meant little to Liff Preedik, who had seen that same bit of composition every day for half a century. He glanced at the church for the sole purpose of seeing how belated he was this time.

The church, of true New England type, had a beautiful portico supported by noble pillars and

crowned by a gabled roof. The steeple, not spire, had three super-imposed divisions—a great square one and two diminishing smaller ones of octagon shape. The square tower, railed around its top, showed four clock faces to the four winds of heaven. Enormous dials they were, and kept in most perfect order by the diligent and faithful sexton.

And the one that faced Liff Preedik informed him that, as usual, he was about half an hour late. Seventy-three it was, and seven was his appointed hour.

A grunt of resignation was his reaction to this, for he knew the church clock was always right, and he knew, too, that he was always late.

He stopped first at the inn, and what with delivering his goods and making a few casual observations on the weather, it was quarter of eight when he made his next stop, at the drug store. Here he was berated, for the men must get to work making ice cream, but his broad shoulders failed to bow beneath the storm of good-natured abuse, and he set out the milk cans with the air of one conferring a favor.

The next port of call was John Carman's house.

It was nearly eight o'clock when his motor truck rattled in at the entrance gate and hurried around toward the kitchen quarters. A fine home it was, the gray shingled house set among tall shrubbery and taller trees, and made gay by beds of autumn flowers. But as Preedik turned round the curve of the drive

his sharp eyes noticed a strange sight on the front porch. It seemed to him a man lay there, fallen, crumpled up in appearance, and of sinister portent. He stopped his car while he looked again, and then jumping from his seat he ran to the porch. He had not been mistaken. John Carman lay there and John Carman was dead.

Preedik's first impulse was to ring the front doorbell. But he thought better of that and hastened, instead, around to the back door.

The cook was waiting for him, grumbling at his tardiness. The housemaid at her side looked in amazement at the milkman who brought no milk in his arms.

"Where's Mr. Carman?" Preedik said, shortly.

"In bed, I suppose," returned the cook; "where's the milk?"

"No matter for a moment. Who's up and about? Anybody?"

"No, nobody of the family." The cook sensed his serious intent. "Why, what's the matter with you?"

"Matter enough. Mr. Carman's out on the front porch—— Is there a man here?"

But Murray, the butler, overhearing the discussion, appeared just then. "I'm here," he said. "What's this you're saying?"

"Bad work, Mister Murray. Your boss is out on the front steps—dead."

The cook and the housemaid promptly screamed, but Murray shut them up at once.

"Be still, you two," he said, gravely rather than angrily. "Come with me, Preedik."

The two men went through the silent house and out at the front door. True enough, John Carman lay there in an ungainly heap, and beyond all doubt dead.

The front door had been closed until Murray opened it, but the screen door of green painted wire was held open by the body of the dead man.

The butler was white-faced and trembling, but he kept his poise, and said, "What must I do? Call Miss Kate?"

"Lemmesse," mused Preedik. "I don't believe I'd do that. Not right now. But you see this ain't my job. I've got my work cut out for me. I got to go on with my milk—there's babies waitin' for their breakfast. You better scoot up to the inn and get Dr. Sherrill down here. I'd say Doc Forman, but he lives so fur away. So, you bring Sherrill back with you, and then he'll know just what's to be done. 'Course, he'll call the constable and all that, but he'll know. I don't. And he'll most likely tell the ladies, and he'll take charge generally. You get him."

"And leave—Mr.—leave that there, alone?" Murray stammered as he glanced at the shape on the floor.

"Oh, Lord, no. And I s'pose them wimmen are no good. Well, I'll stay here while you run to the inn. But for the land's sake hurry back. I must be for gettin' on."

So Murray hastened the block and a half to the inn and had the doctor awakened and told him his news.

Sherrill stared at the messenger, his fiery red hair tousled and his blue eyes blinking under the bushy red eyebrows. But he sensed the message and sent the man away with the word that he would get to the Carman house as quickly as possible and instructions to touch nothing until he came.

Meantime, though Liff Preedik had touched nothing, he had looked keenly about the porch for clues, being versed in the proper procedure as set forth in up-to-date fiction.

But his findings amounted to just one item. He saw, protruding from the back of John Carman, the hilt of a dagger. It seemed to be of metal, ornately chased and deeply driven in.

Murray returned, somewhat recovered from his first nervousness, and ready to assume his rightful place as head of the household staff.

"He's coming," he said, briefly, "and you can get along."

Preedik hated to go, but he had his route to cover, and he dared not delay.

"You can come back when you're through your

list," Murray said, noticing his hesitation and rightly reading its cause.

"Yes, I will. Who ever done this thing?"

"I don't know. It's terrible. I can't rightly get my thoughts straight."

Preedik rattled out at the gate and soon afterward Dr. Sherrill appeared. He found Murray keeping guard over the body, and several other servants looking out at the front door or peeping from the windows.

Without a word, and with an assured touch, the doctor felt of the body, turned it over and scrutinized it from all points.

"Stabbed in the back," he said at last, though this fact was obvious. "Must have been just entering the house. See, there's his keys on a key ring not far from his hand. Was the door locked?"

"Just as always, sir," Murray replied. "When Mr. Carman came in with his latchkey, he always closed the door and shot the bolt. This morning—just now, when I opened the door—the bolt was not on, but the door was fastened, of course."

"He hadn't used the key," Sherrill said, "or the door would have been ajar. Must have been struck down just as he started to unlock it."

"What—what shall we do with him, sir?" worried Murray. "The ladies will hear our voices and be coming down. Can't we take him inside——"

"No, not till we can get the police here. And I

suppose not till we can get the county coroner. In this God-forsaken neck of the woods, of course there's no proper police. The constable is a blockhead. I don't know the sheriff, do you?"

"No, sir. We've had no trafficking with the police, sir. Must we leave Mr. Carman here long?"

"Well, we'll have to get somebody. Where's the telephone?"

"In the library, sir. But there's an extension in my pantry—if you used that, the ladies wouldn't hear you."

"You've got brains, my man. I'll do that, and then let the maid servants get the ladies up. They'll have to be told, and you'd better have coffee ready for them. But you stay here while I telephone. We can't leave this place unguarded. I'll stay around here, for though there's nothing can be done for Mr. Carman, the ladies may need my services. And there's a young man, a son, isn't there?"

"Mr. Peter, oh, yes. He's home now. I suppose he's asleep. Breakfast is at ten Sunday mornings. They all sleep late."

The doctor went round the house to the rear door, and then, finding the butler's telephone, called up the village constable, Mark Roper, whom he had already characterized as a blockhead.

The man, when he came, gave every indication that the doctor's diagnosis of his character had been

correct. Roper was a typical country yokel of the inefficient, ignorant sort usually picked for constables. But he did not show the further disadvantage of pretending to knowledge or importance; he merely stood helplessly asking Dr. Sherrill for advice.

"What are your orders, man?" cried the doctor. "What are you supposed to do in a case like this?"

"I never had a case like this," whimpered the arm of the law, turning shudderingly away from the huddled form on the floor.

"Well, you'll have to hump yourself and do something," Sherrill told him. "We'll get the sheriff, of course, and the coroner, but until they can get over from the county seat you'll have to carry on."

"Can't you get the state troopers?" suggested Roper, hopefully.

"Yes, likely. We'll have to try, for you're sure a weak sister. But you'll have to stand guard here till somebody comes——"

"What's the matter, Sherrill? What's going on here? Oh, my God!"

The speaker stepped out through the front door and gazed in horror at the sight he saw.

It was Peter Carman, the adopted son of the dead man, and almost a stranger to the doctor, and indeed to the citizens generally. He was seldom at home, and when he was he kept himself to himself.

Dr. Sherrill eyed him closely as he stood gazing

at the dead form of his father by adoption. The young man was about thirty, with crisp black hair, very curly, and black eyes that darted about in nervous fashion. His cheeks were red and his lips were full and just now were quivering.

"What happened to him?" he said, in an almost inaudible whisper. "Who did it?"

"Who did what?" Dr. Sherrill flung at him. For the dagger in the man's back was scarcely visible from where Peter stood, and the doctor sought to trap him.

"Don't be silly," young Carman said, looking contemptuous. "Of course, I see he was stabbed, I see the end of the dagger hilt. And I know he had no heart disease, or any reason to drop dead from disease. You know that, too, Dr. Sherrill."

"Yes," the doctor said, changing his tone, "yes, he was stabbed by some enemy. Now, will you tell his sister and his daughter, or would you rather have me do it?"

"Oh, you do it, will you? I couldn't!"

"Very well. Shall I go inside? Will you ask them to come to me as soon as they will?"

"The servants will do that. Martha is maid to both of them. She will fetch them. What are you going to do? I mean who will find out who did it, and all that sort of thing?"

"You don't seem awfully cut up about it," ob-

served the doctor, looking curiously at the young man.

"Well, it isn't my way to make a fuss," he returned, speaking slowly; "and, too, it isn't altogether unexpected. My father had many enemies, and he fully realized that he lived in danger of his life."

"Hey? What's that?" broke in the blockhead constable. "Had enemies, did he? Who were they, now?"

Peter Carman looked at the inquirer. After a brief scrutiny, he turned on his heel and went back into the house. He stood a moment in the doorway, saying, "When the authorities come, I shall be ready to talk to them."

Then he disappeared.

"Stuck-up cuss," said Roper, disinterestedly. "Land knows, I'll be glad when they come. I don't want to mix in this thing."

"Why not? You're a nice constable, shirking your duty like that!"

"Oh, now, Doc Sherrill, look here. You know's well's I do, there's lots of police chaps that'll just love to get hold of this case. Well, what I say is, let 'em have it. Let 'em try to find out who killed Mr. Carman. They won't find out, you know——"

"Why won't they?"

"Not brains enough. I ain't got brains enough, you ain't, Sheriff Gorton, he ain't, and Coroner Flint, he ain't. This here's a case—a big case. You'll see."

The doctor began to revise his opinion of this man to some slight degree. If a man recognized his own lack of brains it was a pretty good sign that he had a little.

But Sherrill felt he must go indoors and attend to his trying ordeal of telling the women of the family what had happened. He half hoped that the maid had already told them, but he went into the library and sat down there.

It was a fine room: well proportioned, well furnished, and having an atmosphere of bookishness and comfort both.

Not hifalutin books, he decided, after a glance at the shelves, but popular, readable books that betokened an astute, avid mind rather than great erudition. He had been in the house before, but mainly on professional calls, and had never been left alone there.

Murray appeared and asked him to stay to breakfast with the family. This invitation the doctor held in abeyance, uncertain whether he would wish to stay after the coming interview.

Soon Miss Kate Carman appeared, and, following immediately, the daughter, Peggy, a beautiful girl, who looked a lot like her father.

Miss Kate was beautiful also—of the dark-eyed, white-haired type of beauty, but the eyes were large and soft and brown, and the white hair was short, with blustering curls over her ears. She wore a trim

tailor-made gown, and her manner was abrupt but entirely composed.

"Tell me everything," she commanded, taking a seat on a chair with a stiff upright back, and looking directly at the doctor.

Peggy, also composed, but with a white face and trembling lips, sat near her aunt, and spoke no word. She, too, had brown eyes and soft brown hair, and was usually a spirited sort, but now the spirit seemed to have departed. She looked hopeless and helpless as she gazed at Dr. Sherrill.

And for once the doctor was at a loss. He had a fine bedside manner, he knew just how to break the news to a weeping family when hope must be given up; this sudden duty that had become his to do seemed an impossible feat.

"How much do you know?" he said to Miss Kate, in response to her demand.

"Nothing at all, but that my brother is dead. I made Murray tell me that much. Was he—was he killed?"

"Yes, Miss Carman," and the doctor found it a bit easier now that the tale was begun. "He was, we judge, just about to open the door with his key when he was stabbed from behind——"

"Stabbed? Oh, no! Wasn't he shot?"

"No, he was stabbed with a dagger. In the back, by some cowardly assassin."

"All assassins are cowardly," declared Miss Kate. "But I can't understand his being stabbed. Can you, Peggy?"

"Oh, Aunt Kate!" The girl gave way to the sobbing she could no longer control. "What difference how he was killed since he is killed? Oh, Daddy, dear Daddy, I loved him so!"

"Why are you so surprised at the fact that he was stabbed?" Dr. Sherrill asked of the older woman.

"Why—— Oh, I don't know. But you see, there was George——"

"Aunt Kate," Peggy spoke up sharply, "I don't think you ought to mention any names—I mean to accuse anybody. Wait till they question you——"

"I am questioning her," Sherrill said.

"I know it, but you have no right to. Only a coroner or sheriff can do that."

"Well, they will be here soon, and I really think it would be better for you two to tell me all you can about this thing. Was your father in fear for his life, Miss Peggy?"

Peggy Carman looked at him. She was a fearless, independent girl, afraid of nobody, but this sudden blow had seemed to change her to a frightened, trembling child, and she found she could not keep up the brave composure she had shown at first.

And then, as she looked, her sense of relative values came back to her. Was she, Peg Carman, afraid of

this ridiculous-looking person, this red-headed, red-mustached, red-eyebrowed caricature of a man?

She drew herself up to her full height, for she had risen and was pacing the long room, and standing still, in front of him, she spoke to Dr. Sherrill.

"I don't know all about the way police handle a murder case," she said, "but I do know they handle it themselves. You are a doctor, and it is your duty to ascertain the cause of death, and see if you can be of any help. But that ends your work in the matter. You are not the coroner or the sheriff and you are acting as if you were one or both. I refuse to answer your questions for you have no right to ask them. When the proper men come I will tell them anything I know."

"Bully for you, Peg," came a voice from the hall doorway, and Peter reappeared, properly groomed and dressed. "Don't take any offence, Dr. Sherrill; my sister is quite right, and I think you know it. Now, all come to breakfast. We must eat, even if Father is dead. Come along, Doc, some hot coffee will do you good."

The doctor agreed to this, and they all went to the bright and attractive breakfast room, where crisp waffles and honey accompanied bacon and eggs.

Miss Kate could eat nothing, but Peter and Peggy made such a good breakfast that Dr. Sherrill began

to think their appetite was due in part at least to nervousness.

They were moody, too, now in silent despairing sorrow, and again, giving way to a forced gayety of demeanor that puzzled the doctor.

Kate Carman was recovering her calm and she began to make arrangements that were both wise and sensible.

"If we cannot move the body," she said, "until the coroner comes, we must put a screen around it. Let them take that large screen over there, the big four-fold one, and put it on the porch so it will hide him from the callers. For I know as soon as this is noised abroad many people will come here.

"Also," she went on, "let somebody—that constable, I suppose—stay by to keep guard. But let him send all would-be visitors around to the side door. Allow no one to use the front porch at all. There may be footprints or finger marks, you know."

"There are none," Dr. Sherrill said. "I looked carefully. But your suggestions are good ones, Miss Carman, and I advise you let your servants carry them out. I am sorry you refuse to tell me your suspicions or let me know of Carman's enemies. He was one of my best friends and I want to be all the help I can in this matter."

"I haven't refused to talk to you; it is Peggy who

did that," said Miss Kate, her large eyes turning to her niece with a glance of reproach. "I only said I couldn't understand his being stabbed."

"Do explain that," urged Sherrill. "Why do you say that?"

"You ought to know yourself. Where are your wits? John was a Western man, a ranchman, a cowboy, and sheriff out there for a long time. Now, do you not suppose he had enemies out there? He made them, of course, by doing his duty. That he always did. But he had to punish evil doers, and naturally they often vowed revenge. But you must know that those Western desperadoes are gunmen; they do not stab people. Every man jack of them is familiar with all kinds of gun play, but I don't believe one of them would kill with a dagger. That's my quandary. How could any of those men whom John arrested and had convicted and sentenced come here after him and kill him the way he was killed? I don't mean they couldn't do it; it might be possible, but highly improbable. Whereas, to be shot with a gun by some one of those vindictive creatures is just what my brother really expected, sooner or later. And I dare say, Dr. Sherrill, he has told you this himself."

"Well, Miss Kate, he did hint at it, but I pooh-poohed the idea, of course, and he didn't harp on it."

"No, John wasn't the sort to harp on things. But it was shooting he expected, not stabbing. Who could

have done it? John had no enemies but those men I speak of."

"He must have had one enemy who chose the dagger rather than the gun," Dr. Sherrill said, "and we must find out who that was."

CHAPTER III

CARMAN IS PRONOUNCED DEAD

HIRAM GORTON both was and was not a typical sheriff. He was a countryman but he was not addicted to faulty English. His clothing was not of fashionable cut, but he did not wear bluejeans tucked in his boot tops.

His gray mustache was of the style called walrus, but his clear, steady eyes and firm, even aggressive chin denoted a stability of purpose, while his crisp, terse sentences were usually indicative of sound judgment and common sense.

He strode into the Carman house. He always walked with a stride; it was unconscious on his part, but it was the only way he could walk. He had come through the side door, and he found the family in the library. Dr. Sherrill had remained, saying he might be of use.

Gorton had hurried over from his home some ten or twelve miles away, and he had sent word to the coroner to follow him as soon as possible. The sheriff had not stopped on the way and had spoken to no-

body on the subject of John Carman's death. And the coroner, arriving not quite ten minutes later, had also come straight and direct from his home.

Coroner Flint, a nervous, fidgety little man, entered, full of abuse of the village fathers of Gilead for not having a better police force.

"Nothing here but a constable!" he complained. "All these rich men, big houses, grand motor cars and everything, and a measly constable to look after everything. No wonder folks get killed. Ought to be a lot of constables and a couple of detectives and—— Well, where's the dead man? Where's the scene of the crime?"

Murray, shocked beyond expression at this outburst, led the way to the front porch, where Gorton stood looking down on the body of John Carman. Young Carman and Dr. Sherrill were there, too, the women having stayed in the house.

"Stabbed," said Gorton, curtly.

"Yep," agreed the coroner. After a few moments of silence, while he examined the body, he stood upright again and said, in a pompous, even sepulchral voice, "I pronounce this man dead."

Had there been anyone present with less deep interest in the matter than the little group of onlookers, it must have seemed laughable to hear this pronunciamiento, but nobody so much as smiled.

Red-headed Dr. Sherrill nodded his full agreement

to the statement, and Peter Carman paled a little and clenched his fists at the solemn words.

"He was stabbed by a dagger, which remains in the wound," Flint went on. "I can't say yet with certainty, but I think he has been dead for several hours. He may be carried into the house now and placed upon a bed or couch. Call the family together that I may question them. Who are you, sir?"

He turned abruptly to Dr. Sherrill as if seeing him for the first time; though this was scarcely possible, for no one with normal eyesight could fail to notice the red-faced and red-haired man.

"I am Dr. Sherrill," he said, "local practitioner. They sent for me when the body was found. I've touched nothing save to ascertain that the man was dead."

"How long you been here?" asked the coroner.

Sherrill looked at his watch. "Half an hour or so."

"Know anything about the matter?"

"Nothing more than I see before me."

Flint eyed him sharply but said only, "Come along in, then. Roper, you get somebody to help you move him. Don't disturb anything. Where'll we go?"

Peter led the way to the library. Somehow it seemed to him the most appropriate room.

Coroner Flint glanced about him and then took the easiest chair and asked that all the family be called.

"This is only a preliminary questioning," he said. "Needn't drag the servants into it yet."

He rose as Kate Carman and Peggy came in and Dr. Sherrill introduced them.

"All right," Flint said. "Stand by, Sheriff. I'll ask questions and you check up on me."

"Not much in my line," Gorton said, wiping his forehead with a big handkerchief. "I've been sheriff a number o' years, but I've never had a murder case before."

"Well, you've got one now," Flint told him, but his practical matter-of-fact tone seemed to quell alarm rather than arouse it.

"What can you tell me, ma'am?" and Flint looked musingly at Kate Carman.

"I? Why, nothing at all. I know nothing of the circumstances or—or how my brother came by his death."

"No—you don't? Then why're you so nervous, ma'am? So jumpy, you know."

"I'm not," was the angry reply, with a sudden flash of dark eyes that seemed to belie the words. "If I am, it's only what anyone would feel at having a brother—killed."

"Yes'm, I know, but you'd feel better if you'd come clean."

"Come clean?" Miss Kate was puzzled at the locution.

"He means tell the truth, Aunt Kate," Peter said, gently. "But I assure, you, Mr. Coroner, my aunt is speaking the truth. She has never spoken anything else."

"Of course not!" Peggy broke in, incensed at the implication. "If you're here to insult us, sir——"

"There, there, Peg," Peter interrupted her, "you don't understand. Coroner Flint has no wish to insult anybody."

"Of course not," said Flint, greatly relieved at this help. "And I suppose the ladies would be nervous and hystericky, why not? Well, we must get on. Who found the body?"

"The milkman did, as he came on his rounds," Peter answered. "He told some of our servants and they called me. Then we sent for the constable and for Dr. Sherrill, and then for you and Sheriff Gorton. That's the history of the case up to date."

"And very well put," Flint nodded his approbation. "Now, who saw this man last alive?"

His hearers looked at one another.

"Why, I suppose we all did," Peter said, at last. "We all had dinner here at home, and afterward, I should say at about eight-thirty or so, Father went out."

"Do you know where he went?"

"I do. He went up to the inn to play poker, as he has done every Saturday night all summer."

"Who'd he play with?"

Pete Carman looked across the room at Dr. Sherrill, and by a nod seemed to indicate that it was the doctor's turn to take up the tale.

Not quite understanding, Coroner Flint gave a grunt of impatience, and Dr. Sherrill spoke.

"With me," he said, "and with four other men. We're a sort of club, you see, and we play once a week."

"I see." The coroner transferred his intent gaze from Peter to the doctor. "Play late?"

"Stopped about one o'clock. Always do stop about that time. Just a little friendly game, you know. Nothing frisky."

"No, I s'pose not. Who else sat in?"

"Two men named Nichols and Dane, and two much younger men, nephews of Mr. Dane's."

"Big stakes?"

"On the contrary, very small. Less'n a hundred dollars changed hands."

"Who left the party first?"

"They all went away at the same time. They all live around the green, and they walked home. One of 'em took a taxi and went off by himself. The others, including Mr. Carman, went away together. Well, that is, young Phillips, he went straight across the green, as he was in a hurry to get home, having a toothache."

"Oh, well, all those details can be checked up," the coroner said, frowning a little, obviously because he seemed to be getting nowhere. "Then, if those men walked along together, who would be the first to drop off at his own home?"

"Why, Mr. Carman," Sherrill replied. "This house here is less than two blocks from the inn. Doubtless the three came along here, Carman dropped out, and the other two went on round the green to their homes."

"Looks that way. We must see those other two, but it looks like Carman dropped off here and came up on his own porch, took out his keys, was about to unlock his door, when someone stepped up behind him and stabbed him in the back."

"That's the way it looked to me, too, Dr. Flint," Sherrill said.

"Killed with one swift, well-directed blow," the coroner went on. "Sharp dagger, keen, narrow blade, perhaps, say, seven inches long. Went in just below the fifth rib, pierced the heart. Of course, he'd fall at once, forward, and died instantly. Or practically so. Hemorrhage, of course, but no bleeding of the stab wound. Never knew what hit him. Scoundrel! To strike a man in the back!"

"Can you find him, Dr. Flint? Can you get him?" asked Peggy, her eyes dark and somber with anger as well as grief.

"I hope so, Miss. But you must all help. You see, I know nobody in Gilead—don't know anything about the folks here. Mr. Carman have any enemies?"

"Not here," Kate Carman answered.

"Where, then?" urged Flint.

"Well, he was a Wyoming man, you see, and out there he was sheriff. You know yourself that means he made enemies. All sheriffs do, that is, Western sheriffs. Now, I can't tell you of any individuals, but I do know that there are men out there who would be very glad to know that John Carman is dead and who would be quite capable of having been the ones to bring it about."

"It doesn't seem altogether likely," Flint said, slowly, "that one of those men, angry at Mr. Carman for some deed he had done as sheriff, would come all the way to New England to kill him. Wasn't he going West again?"

"Yes, and very soon."

"Then, as I say, it isn't likely they came here. Unless they were Eastern men to start with."

"I don't know about that. I don't know about it all definitely, anyhow. Only I do know my brother was worried of late and had fears for his life. Not that John Carman was a coward or a weakling. He was afraid of no man in fair fight. But of late he has been restless, and when I asked him why, he said once that

somebody had it in for him and would very likely succeed."

"But you gathered he meant some Westerner?"

"I assumed that; I didn't gather it. But it certainly could not have been any of his friends or fellow townsmen who killed him. He was respected and beloved by all the community."

Dr. Sherrill's red eyebrows drew together a bit at this speech. He was not quite ready to agree that John Carman was beloved by all and sundry, and if he was respected it was not entirely a kindly respect, but rather a tribute to his power and influence in village politics.

"Well, we can't say for sure that the murderer was not a townsman. That we must find out. Now, did anyone hear Mr. Carman come up on the porch last night? Which of you have front rooms?"

"There are two front rooms that look down on the porch," Miss Kate said, in her dignified way. "Peggy, my niece, has one of them, the other was her father's room."

"Yes, and did you, Miss Peggy, hear your father's step on the porch last night or were you asleep?"

"I was asleep," Peggy stated, but there was something about the positive assurance that made it seem a bit overdone. The girl held her head too high, stressed her speech too strongly, looked the coroner too straight in the eye.

It required no clairvoyant, no psycho-analyst to know for a certainty that she was not speaking the truth. Moreover, her hands grasped tightly the arms of her chair and her foot tapped nervously on the carpet.

Flint looked at her for a moment, and then said, easily, "No, take that back. You weren't asleep."

To his surprise, for he fully expected her to flare up, she gave a little laugh and said, "Well, no, I wasn't exactly. But I had gone to bed and I was just dropping off when I heard someone come up on the porch. I don't know whether it was Dad or Peter."

The coroner was chagrined, for he knew he had lost his chance. He had fairly caught her, but she had slipped through his fingers, and had done so because she had an instant to think. A smart young person, Miss Peggy Carman, and one who would bear watching.

She continued to think, as she sat looking at him with inscrutable eyes.

She wore her hair in the bobbed fashion of a Maxfield Parrish page boy, the thick, soft locks curling a bit round her ears, but a straight bang across her low, wide brow. She wore a white sports suit, having no black frock and no mind to wear one if she had. Independent and perverse she looked, yet of undaunted courage. Was she hiding anything, the coroner wondered, and if so, what and why?

"Try to think," Flint went on, persuasively. "See if you can't recollect some little thing that would tell you which one it was."

"No, I can't," said Peggy, positively, and he turned to her brother.

"You are the adopted son of Mr. Carman?" he asked of Pete, "the legally adopted son?"

"Yes. Papers signed, sealed, and delivered many years ago," the young man replied.

Flint sighed and looked at Peter Carman more closely. He had learned to distrust this flippant, innocent-looking type of modern youth, and though this chap was surely thirty years old, and past the age known as the "younger generation," he had all the impertinence of that objectionable age and Flint prepared to combat it.

"You were in business with your father?" he went on, and Pete stared at him.

"No," he said. "I'm on my own."

"Oh, I see. What is your calling?"

"I'm a bond salesman. Why?"

"It is necessary, Mr. Carman, to get the family straightened out. I trust you will put no obstacles in my way."

"Of course not. Go ahead. I suppose anything I may say will be used against me?"

"It pleases you to be flippant, but I can assure you

it is not to your advantage, sir. Where were you last evening?"

"I was at home here to dinner. Then I went to the Country Club and had a game of bowls. After that, I went to a night club."

"What one?"

"The Small Hours Club; that's the only decent one around here."

"And what time did you come home from there?"

"About two or three o'clock."

"A little closer, please. Nearer two or three?"

"Lord, I don't know. When a fellow comes home from a night club he doesn't bother about the time. I always go there Saturday night. All us fellows do."

"Very well. Now, when you did come home, did you see your father, alive or dead, on the front porch?"

"No, of course I didn't."

"At what door did you come in?"

"The side door; I always use it."

"But you passed the front porch on your way in."

"I didn't look toward it. Also, it was dark, and the shrubbery is very thick. He may have been there, or he may not. I do not know."

Peter spoke frankly and with a straightforward gaze at the coroner.

But Flint was wary, and he knew that both these

modern young people could pull the wool over his eyes if they wanted to. But he had no real reason to think they wanted to. He had no reason at all to suspect the honesty of Peter or of his sister, but he had to make these definite inquiries and he was of no mind to be sidetracked from his duty.

"Now, Miss Carman," he turned back to Peggy, "when you heard a step on the porch was it the front porch or the side porch?"

"I didn't hear a step," she declared, quite herself again. "I never said I heard a step."

"You said you heard someone come up on the porch."

"Well, it wasn't a step, it was more like somebody talking."

"Ah, voices. Then there must have been two people at least."

"I don't know, I tell you. I was half asleep. I just sort of imagined it."

"Oh, no, you didn't imagine it. Now, which porch was it?"

"It might have been either. My room is in the corner between the two porches."

"And about what time was it?"

"I can't say. I had just heard the hall clock strike one——"

"Ah, one?"

"But I don't know that it was one o'clock. That

clock strikes the half hours, so it could have been any half-past stroke."

"I see. Where were you last evening?"

"Here at home, alone with Aunt Kate."

"Not out at any dance?"

"No. I had been playing in the tennis tournament, and I was too tired to go to a dance."

"Then it is not surprising you were wearied and cannot say just when you heard those voices beneath your window. But if you could remember, it might be helpful in finding out the truth about your father's death."

"No," Peggy reiterated, shaking her head, "no, I don't know."

The coroner questioned them a little more, but seemingly got no new information, and then he requested that the servants be brought in.

They came, it seemed in endless procession, but soon they were weeded out and dismissed until there remained only Martha, the ladies' maid, Murray, the butler, and a footman whose duty it was to wait until the last of the family came in at night and then lock up the house.

Flint questioned this man closely but learned little.

"Tell me, Taylor," he said, "why do you sit up to lock the house when I've been told Mr. Carman locks the door when he comes in?"

"Yes, sir, but there's Mr. Pete to come in, and

maybe Miss Peggy. And sometimes, Miss Kate, she's out. I have to make sure they're all in, then I puts on all the bolts and burglar chains and goes to bed."

"And last night what happened?"

The man looked scared. "Well, I just sat and sat. And Mr. Carman he never came."

"Mr. Pete came?"

"Yessir, he came, long 'bout—oh, I dunno what time, four o'clock, I guess."

"Four o'clock nothing," said Pete. "More like three or two-thirty. He was asleep, Taylor was. But I didn't wake him, for I wanted to slip upstairs quietly myself. And I did. And I didn't know whether Dad was in or not, and that's the truth, the honest truth."

Again Coroner Flint felt impressed by the chap's veracity, but again he refrained from saying so. He made no response of any sort, but turned to the maid, Martha, a neat trim person with intelligent eyes.

She said she had no information to give, for the servants' quarters were all at the back of the house. But at the end of the futile session of inquiry she vouchsafed one bit of evidence, if such it could be called.

"I was dusting the porch, sir," she said, in a matter-of-fact way, "and I found this."

From her apron pocket she produced a withered

rosebud, pink and still giving off a pleasant fragrance.

"H'm," said Flint, quite unimpressed, and making no move to take the flower from her. Nor would he have paid any further attention to it had it not been that Peggy gave a little irrepressible gasp, just enough to make him turn toward her.

The girl was staring, wide-eyed, at the withered blossom, and seemingly without volition held out her hand for it.

Martha gave it to her, and Flint, waiting till she had it in her hand, said, coolly, "Let me have it, Miss Peggy."

A look of baffled rage came into her lovely eyes, and then, as suddenly, she smiled, and with a superbly careless gesture, she flung it at him, saying, "Catch!"

"Thank you," he said, and put it in his pocket.

"That all, Martha?" he went on, to the maid.

"Well, no, sir, it ain't," she said, in that promising way of hers.

"You have more to tell?"

"Yes, sir—that is, sir, if you want me to tell anything I saw—just happened to see, like, this morning."

"Yes," the coroner was very grave, "tell of anything you saw."

"Well, then, sir, I saw him—that doctor," she

looked toward Sherrill, "take something out of Mr. Carman's pocket while he was—was seeing what ailed the master."

"You saw this?"

"Yes, sir. He took out a paper."

Sherrill's face was blazing; flesh as well as hair and mustache were all a fiery red now.

"She's a—a liar!" he spluttered. "Nothing of the sort! How dare you say such a thing?"

"I saw you," Martha repeated, placidly, and quite unafraid.

"What was it, Dr. Sherrill?" Flint asked, and everybody looked at him questioningly.

But before he could make any reply, a man shot into the room, a state trooper, who looked as if he were bursting with some fearful news.

"Coroner Flint here?" he said; "and Sheriff Gorton? And you, Roper? Well, you're wanted, all of you. I'll stay here, and you all go over to the Nichols house, across the green. Montcalm Nichols, you know. He's been killed. Murdered on his own doorstep. They just found him. Hurry along, they haven't touched the body yet. I told 'em not to. We had an awful time to find you, Sheriff. We telephoned and your folks said you had come to Gilead, but nobody knew where. Well, it's a terrible state of affairs. Anyway, you two—no, all three of you—get along over there. I'll hold everything here. And send to

Hartford for more help. Lord, what a horrible situation!"

The three men hastily departed. Dr. Sherrill followed them and vanished.

The young sergeant who had brought the news was asked for further details but had none to give.

"Come along and get some hot coffee," invited Pete, and Sergeant Malloy gladly went.

Miss Kate glanced at her niece to find her scrutinizing a very withered rosebud. "Where'd you get it?" she asked.

"I picked the old dear's pocket," Peggy replied.

CHAPTER IV

ON ANOTHER DOORSTEP

THE houses that bordered the green on the two ends and the north side were all of elaborate design and set in spacious grounds. But the summer residents were catholic in their tastes, and not all of them realized that Colonial architecture was more appropriate to the New England landscape than European importations. There were Georgian and Tudor houses, there were Italian and Spanish villas, and here and there a really old Connecticut farmhouse, though often remodeled out of all semblance to its original simplicity.

The house toward which the trio of horrified policemen were hastening was the beautiful home of Montcalm Nichols, halfway along the green on the north side. It was one of the show places of the town, or would have been, save for the fact that it could not be seen from the road. Hedges of box or privet were reinforced by tall conifers or dense clumps of shrubbery.

Somewhat awed by the beauty of the place as well

as by their tragic errand, the men passed through the great gates and hurried along the wide paths. Rolling green lawns spread on either side, vistas showed glimpses of gorgeous gardens and shimmering ponds with playing fountains.

The house itself was long and low, with walls of brick and rough stone, half-timbered with old oak and roofed with slate. Casement windows with small leaded panes were set in rows and scarlet chimneys gave a touch of color.

There was no entrance porch. The great door, flush with the ground, stood wide open, and outside it, on the stone-paved threshold, lay the huddled figure of a man. A gruesome sight, a hideous blot on the beauty of the scene: the master of all this great estate, the owner of this sturdy, well-built home lay dead on his own doorstep. And dead by a violent hand. Dead, with the crimson of his own life blood staining the stones whereon he lay.

Behind him, framed in the doorway, was the butler, Pitts. This man stood sentinel-like, unwilling to yield to any of his subordinates the charge of his master, dead or alive, but ready to turn the matter over to the Law.

Sheriff Gorton took charge, ignoring the effort the village constable put forth to become spokesman. But all were silent while the coroner leaned over the stricken man.

"Just like the Carman business," he said, and Pitts looked at him inquiringly.

But Flint heeded him not, and went on, speaking to himself as much as to his colleagues:

"Yes, struck in the same place, below the fifth rib, right through the heart! And"—he stared at the weapon which they could now see protruding from the back of the victim—"with the same dagger—I mean, one exactly like it!"

"No!" Gorton knelt to look. "But it is, the twin of that other! What does it all mean?" No one answered him, and the bewildered sheriff went on:

"It's pretty terrible, but I can't see any meaning to it." He stood upright again, stretching his back and gazing about him. The gay flowers in the window boxes seemed to hold his attention, then his eyes returned to the still figure of Montcalm Nichols.

A tall figure Nichols was in life, but a thin, spare man, and now he seemed, as he lay convulsively doubled up, to be of insignificant size.

"May we take him inside, sir?" whispered Pitts, of a submissive mien perhaps for the first time in his dominating career.

"Shortly," returned Flint, who was making a few chalk marks to show the position of the body. "Where's his hat?"

"Inside, sir," said Pitts. "I picked it up, not thinking that any harm."

"And probably it was not," Flint said. "Where did it lie?"

"About here, sir, next this urn."

The man designated a stone urn that held a small shrub and that stood perhaps two feet from the head the hat had fallen from.

"H'm. Get it," said Flint, curtly.

Pitts, who had not stepped outside the door, went back into the hall and quickly returned, looking a little worried.

"It isn't there, sir," he said. "I hunt it on the hat tree, but it's gone."

"Make it your business to find it," Flint ordered. "But not just now. I think, Gorton, we can move him now. As you see, there was no struggle. It looks to me as if Mr. Nichols was just about to unlock his door, as Carman was, and he was stabbed in the back by an unseen assailant and death was practically instantaneous."

"Yes. Where are the keys?"

"I suppose you picked those up, too?" asked Flint, turning to the butler.

"No, sir," declared Pitts. "That I didn't. I never touched a thing but the hat. I did that unthinking-like. I was all put about, you see."

"Well, was the door unlocked, then?"

"Yes, sir, it was always unlocked. That was Mr. Nichols' way. He said there never was burglars or

sneak thieves in this section, and you know, Mr. Roper, that's true."

"True as gospel," stated the constable. "Half the people in Gilead never lock their doors. And the other half don't need to."

"Did Mr. Nichols carry anything else?" asked Flint. "A stick, now, or an umbrella?"

"He didn't last night," Pitts informed him. "I let him out myself—I always wait on the master—and he carried nothing except his light overcoat. He's got it on now, you see."

"Where did he spend the evening? Do you know?"

"Oh, yes, sir. At Dr. Sherrill's. He always went there of a Saturday night. They played cards. Can't we take Mr. Nichols inside? There's some people coming in at the gate."

"Keep 'em out!" roared the sheriff. "Roper, you attend to that. Get some help, anywhere you can, get gardeners or house servants, but block all entrances."

"The gardeners aren't about much on Sundays," Pitts volunteered. "I'll send some of the garage men—but please, can't we get the master in, decent-like, first?"

"Yes," Flint agreed at last. "We three can manage, I think."

But Nichols was of light weight, and Pitts and the sheriff carried him in while Flint remained studying the scene of the crime.

They placed the dead man on a couch in a dressing room or cloak room, just inside the entrance; a small room, but beautifully appointed and equipped for guests. Reverently Pitts hovered over his dead master, composing his limbs and closing the staring eyes.

Flint had removed the dagger and was studying it. He joined the others.

"It's so unbelievable," he said, slowly, "so unreal, that there must be a simple and quickly found explanation."

"Yes?" Gorton sniffed. "I've heard that theory advanced by the big-noise detectives. But if you can see a glimmer of explanation I'd be glad to know what it is."

"Two prominent citizens struck down on their own doorsteps, at about the same time, and by precisely similar weapons——" Flint said, musingly, and Gorton interrupted him.

"Was it about the same time? They been dead the same number of hours?"

"Looks so to me," Flint replied. "I put both deaths at about two o'clock. But you know yourself that's tentative and uncertain. The question is whether the same hand struck down both, or whether we have two murderers to look for."

"Small use in conjecturing," Gorton said, shaking his head. "We must get the family together and find out some facts. Are they up, Pitts?"

"Probably not, sir, or we'd hear some moving about. The ladies breakfast in bed, and late at that. The servants are mostly up, but they won't come in here until their reg'lar time. Shall I call any of them?"

"No, not yet. Who had better break the news to Mrs. Nichols, Flint? I declare, this is all outside my experience. I know how to be a sheriff in a proper way, but a murder—well, I've got to have some help, somebody bigger'n I am! I hope Inspector Wall will come from Hartford. He's a powerful worker and he'd know just what to do."

"You know what to do," Flint said. "Don't lay down on your job. Get the lady of the house, get the rest of the family, then get the servants, and find out some facts. You can't face Wall when he comes, without having learned anything."

"That's right. Now, Pitts, you get Mrs. Nichols down here. It'll be a sorry errand, and you can send a maid, or whatever you think best to do, but get the lady here. Who else is there?"

"Miss Anne, that's Mr. Nichols' daughter. Daughter of his first wife, you know."

"No, I don't know. I know nothing about these people. Any more in the family?"

"No, not in the family. And there's no guests here just now. Some are expected to-day."

"Better send 'em word not to come. But first get the lady down. The time is getting along."

Pitts left them and went toward the domestic offices.

The discipline of the house had kept the servants from intruding beyond their rightful domains, but the housekeeper and the second man were hovering in the corridors to learn the cause of the butler's long-continued absence.

"It's fierce," Pitts gasped, as he sank into a chair in his pantry. "The master's been killed, and that's the long and short of it. Now don't raise a hullabaloo—there'll be enough of that later. Just keep your heads, and do as I say. You, Mrs. Mellon, go to Mrs. Nichols' rooms and either tell her yourself or get Lisette to tell her. Whichever you think best."

"It'll take the two of us," said sagacious Mrs. Mellon. "What about Miss Anne?"

"Oh, let Nanna tell her. Lord, I can't think what'll happen!"

"You don't have to," said Mrs. Mellon, practically. "Better keep cool and go back and look after things. Who all's there? Police?"

"Yes. You take it coolly——"

"Why not? As you say, there'll be doings soon. Get back there, Pitts, and keep an eye on all goings-on."

"She's right," the butler murmured to himself, and reluctantly ending his brief reprieve he returned to the scene of action.

And action it certainly was.

As Pitts reached the room where the body of Montcalm Nichols lay, he heard wild shrieks and wails, and saw Phyllis Nichols, kneeling by the side of her dead husband, her arms flung across his breast, her whole frame shaking with convulsive sobs and her high-pitched voice uttering alternate words of endearment and of woe.

She had on a voluminous boudoir robe of pale yellow satin edged with marabout, beneath which she wore elaborate pajamas of apricot silk and lace. Unheeding her apparel, unheeding the strange men present, she writhed in tumultuous spasms of excitement, now bursting into tears, now staring about her and vowing vengeance.

The maid, Lisette, tried to quiet her, the butler ventured to speak to her, but all to no avail.

The two police officers watched her curiously, anxious to learn what they could from her mad ravings rather than to quell her storms of grief.

A beautiful woman she was, even more so in this wrought-up state of nerves and emotional tension. Her dark eyes, wildly darting from one man to another, then back to her husband; her ceaselessly moving hands, now clasped to her breast, then grasping at her gown or the couch pillow or clutching at the cold still form before her, she seemed the incarnation of a Niobe wrought by some master sculptor. Her black hair, worn in what is called the wind-blown

bob, was indeed as if tossed by the winds. The thick wavy tresses flung themselves either side of her convulsed face, while her quivering nostrils and pursed scarlet lips showed her utter lack of self-control.

A step sounded outside and the men looked up quickly to see Dr. Sherrill entering the room. He was out of breath, evidently from fast walking, and he took Phyllis Nichols by the elbows and lifted her to her feet.

"Be quiet," he said, not unkindly, but in decided tones.

"Oh, Lu," she cried, in a broken wail, "oh, Lu!"

"Yes, Phyllis, yes, I know. Don't try to talk, just be quiet. Lisette, get me a glass and spoon and a little water."

He took a small bottle from his pocket and gave her a dose of aromatic ammonia, which she took with docile, childlike obedience.

"You want to talk to Mrs. Nichols?" Dr. Sherrill asked, looking at Gorton.

"Yes, I do, and right now."

"Very well," Dr. Sherrill said. "But let's have the interview in another room. Where—where'd you find him?" He glanced half fearfully at Nichols's body.

"On the doorstep—same as Carman," returned Flint, biting off his words sharply.

"Stabbed?" asked Sherrill, seemingly fascinated and unable to move.

"Yes, stabbed with a dagger just like the other."

This brought a fresh scream from Mrs. Nichols and Dr. Sherrill turned to her again.

"Come," he said, quietly, "come with me. Take her other arm, Lisette."

Between them they led her to the living room and placed her in a great easy chair, with soft cushions and a pillow-like footstool.

But a wave of arms sent the cushions flying and a vigorous kick propelled the footstool after them, while Phyllis Nichols sat bolt upright, saying:

"Stop such nonsense. I'm not an invalid! Now, I want to know who killed my husband and why."

"That's what we want to know, Mrs. Nichols." Gorton spoke in a straightforward way, and looked directly at her. "I am glad you are not ill, and I beg of you to control your feelings while we ask a few questions. I am sure you want to do all you can to help us find out the truth of this matter."

"I do. Now, waste no time in futile palaver. I mean don't ask my name and age and rubbish of that kind. Get right down to facts."

"That's good advice. When did you last see your husband alive?"

Flint caught his breath. This was forging ahead with a vengeance. Yet he was glad Gorton had the nerve to do it.

Mrs. Nichols took no offense at the question, however.

"Last evening," she said; "after dinner. He left the house about—oh, I don't know, between half-past eight and nine, I guess."

"Where did he go?"

"He came over to my house," supplied Dr. Sherrill. "As I told you at the Carman inquiry, we play cards every Saturday night."

"Yes, I remember your telling me. Did Mr. Nichols leave you at the same time Mr. Carman did?"

"Yes. They went away together. Antony Dane was with them. I watched the three go along the street together toward Carman's house."

"That's the other side of the green?"

"Yes. You see, they've been playing with me Saturday nights all summer. And when they go home, they usually follow the same procedure. Carman drops out first at his home, then Nichols and Dane go on round the green, Nichols stopping here, and Dane going on home. I've heard them say so often."

"Oh, hush that twaddle," Phyllis Nichols burst out, angrily. "Just as I said, you mull over some silly point, and all the time the murderer is getting away. I suppose you admit there is a murderer, don't you? You agree that there must be?"

"Yes, Mrs. Nichols," Flint took up the tale, "and you're right in your criticism. Now, help us more. Do you know of any enemies your husband may have had?"

"He had dozens of them," she stated, "but they didn't kill him. Do you say that John Carman has been killed, too?"

"Yes, at about the same time and in the same way."

"Then how can you think it was an enemy of Mr. Nichols? Unless they had the same enemy, which isn't likely, for though they were good neighbors and all that, the two men had little in common, and certainly not enemies."

Flint looked at her in amazement. Was this cool, self-possessed witness the same woman who had been yelling and screaming in hysteria?

"But if not an enemy, then who, Mrs. Nichols? Not a friend?"

"You say the weapon was the same?"

"Not the same dagger, but two exactly alike, or very nearly so."

"Then—" the dark eyes looked intently into Flint's own, the wind-blown head nodded positively, and she said, "Then it was a homicidal maniac."

"Perhaps so," said Flint, non-committally, "quite likely, Mrs. Nichols. But, even so, we have to make these preliminary inquiries, and I'm sure you'll answer a few more. You are Mr. Nichols' second wife, I'm told."

"Yes," she said, a gentle smile breaking over her lovely face.

Flint couldn't wonder that Nichols or any other man would have wooed her. A more beautiful woman he thought he had never seen, and he gave himself one instant of rapturous delight in just looking at her before he brought himself back to his distasteful duty of quizzing her.

Dr. Sherrill, however, gave himself more time. He sat gazing in adoration, oblivious of the occasion and of the onlookers.

Without seeming to, both Flint and Gorton observed the doctor's absorption, and came to the conclusion that his interest in the lady was more than mere neighborly sympathy in her affliction. Also, it opened avenues of conjecture that made Gorton sigh with apprehension that this case was going to be too much for him. It was beyond the jurisdiction of a mere sheriff. An inspector was needed; a detective, a—oh, a miracle worker, if these two murders were to be duly and promptly solved.

Two daggers—alike. Two crimes—alike.

He forced himself to give over thinking and to act.

He felt he could manage this woman better if she would rant and rave again. Instead, Phyllis Nichols sat, nestling now in her easy chair, fingering the soft feathers that bordered her gown, and alertly eying the sheriff who was trying to quiz her. But her very insolence, veiled though it was with a gentle sadness, gave him courage to proceed, and he went on.

"How long have you been married to Mr. Nichols?" he asked, in a cold, clear voice.

"About two years," she answered softly.

"He was much older than you?"

"Twenty-five years older."

"You are—you were—happily married?"

"I don't admit your right to ask that," she said, looking up at him from beneath long, drooping lashes, "but I've not the least objection to answering. We were very happily married. I've lost my best friend."

But now there was no show of emotion, no visible sign of grief at her loss.

"What was your husband's business?"

"He was a lawyer—a criminal lawyer."

"He has, then, condemned men to imprisonment or—worse?"

"I suppose he has." She shrugged her lovely slim shoulders. "But Mr. Nichols never mentioned his business affairs to me."

"No, I suppose not. You will know that, Dr. Sherrill. Is it not true?"

"That Nichols was the means of bringing punishment to evil doers? Most certainly. All criminal lawyers have to do that at times."

"And may it not be the result of resentment or antagonism on the part of these evil doers or their comrades that this crime has come about?"

"Of course, it may be so," the doctor conceded. "It seems to me most likely."

"And the same can be said of John Carman," Flint put in.

"Then you've solved the mystery," Phyllis cried, sitting upright. "Now, all you have to do is to look back in the lives of those two men and see who owed them a grudge. Do you suppose the same man killed both, Mr. Gorton?"

"That we can't judge yet. It may be. Yet, if they were killed at the same time, it precludes that. Oh, there seems no end to the work to be done!"

Gorton, overcome, fell silent, thinking of the tasks before him. The coroner, less impressionable and a bit more brutal of method, spoke almost sharply as he said:

"Where were you last evening, Mrs. Nichols?"

"I? Mercy, when you spring at me like that, I have no memory! I don't know where I was."

She smiled and became deeply absorbed in braiding fronds of her feathers into an intricate pattern.

"I am waiting for an answer," came the cold tones of the coroner.

"I tell you I don't remember," she said, pettishly. "Where was I, Lisette?"

"You were at home all evening, madame. You didn't go out anywhere."

"Oh, that's so! No wonder I couldn't remember where I went, when I didn't go anywhere!"

The light laughter that accompanied this speech was palpably forced. Also, the sudden glance that the speaker shot at Dr. Sherrill was nervous and anxious-eyed.

The doctor said nothing. He looked at Phyllis more thoughtfully, and less as an infatuated adorer, but he made no comment on her words.

"What did you do to amuse yourself, Mrs. Nichols, all the evening?"

"Well, let me see. I read for a time, and I played a little on the piano, and I tried on a new gown and—oh, I did just what any woman does who has an evening at home alone."

"You're sure you weren't out of the house?"

"Well, if I had been, Lisette would know it, wouldn't you, Lisette?"

"Certainly, madame. I would attend your going."

"And you didn't do so?" asked Flint.

"No, sir," replied the maid. "Therefore, Madame was in her home all the evening."

A slow, even step was heard descending the staircase, which was built into one end of the great living room.

"That isn't true," said a cold, hard voice. "Mrs. Nichols was out most of the evening."

CHAPTER V

A BEAUTIFUL WIFE AND AN UNBEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER

THE speaker came slowly down the stairs and into the view of the astonished men.

"Don't look at me like that!" she snapped at Coroner Flint, who seemed about to arrest her at once, so accusing was his glare at her. Anne Nichols, daughter of the dead man, was one of the most unprepossessing girls the coroner had ever seen. Of course, it was not his habit to arrest all unprepossessing girls who came his way, but this particular one looked so hard-hearted and cold-blooded and generally capable of desperate deeds, that he could scarcely refrain from telling her that anything she said would be used against her, and he hoped she'd say a lot.

He did refrain, though, from any such absurd proceeding, and merely said in tones that were decently courteous, if not genial:

"You are Miss Nichols?"

"I am; I am Anne Nichols, daughter of Montcalm Nichols, and I overheard enough to know that my father is dead. Who killed him?"

"Eavesdropping, were you?" cried Phyllis, shaking a pink forefinger at her. "But then, you always are."

She laughed and nestled back into her down cushions, seeming to enjoy the withering scorn of Anne's frown.

"I can't help hearing things, I suppose," retorted Anne. "I heard you go downstairs and out at the side door about nine or half-past nine last night. Can you deny it?"

"Of course I can." The wind-blown bob waved as its owner nodded vigorously. "And anyway, it's none of your business, Miss Paulina Pry! Do you know your father is dead—murdered—and here you are trying to pick a petty quarrel! Go into that room, there, and pay your respects to the dead. Have you no heart, no affection? Your father loved you, and you stand there browbeating poor little me."

Tears came back to the lovely eyes, sobs shook the rounded shoulders, and Phyllis clasped her hands in mute appeal to the tall, strong young figure that stood before her.

An appeal, however, that was of no avail.

Anne Nichols stared at the plaintive, flower-like face, and said, sternly:

"Stop talking rot! Go and get yourself properly dressed, and then come back here and try to show a little common sense. Lisette, take Mrs. Nichols away and dress her."

Meekly the maid obeyed, and with an air of injured innocence Phyllis let herself be led away up the stairs.

Anne Nichols looked from one of the men to another. She was a strange sort of girl. So heavily built as to be ungainly, entirely devoid of grace or charm, with no claim to beauty, she yet showed a dominance and power that betokened a strong personality and an indomitable spirit. Her ash-blond hair was in that uninteresting stage known as "growing out again." It had been cut, but now was of an awkward, intractable length, and was twisted into two knobs at the back of her neck. Her light brown eyes and pale muddy complexion gave her no beauty of expression, and her loosely hung arms and large hands were almost simian in effect.

Yet there was something compelling. The lack-luster eyes held steadily eyes into which they looked. The hard, uncurved mouth betokened stability of purpose, and the strong chin promised determination.

Sheriff Gorton, himself country-bred, recognized the type that no amount of riches or training could endow with culture. Commonplace Anne Nichols was and commonplace she always would be. Yet that is not to deny her certain strong and sterling qualities, among which were courage, bravery, and truth. No obstacle could keep Anne Nichols from doing her duty, or what she deemed her duty. No danger was too great for her to face, once she was convinced that

it must be met. The greatest sorrow she had ever known was when her father married this girl, Phyllis; this butterfly creature, whose fairy-like fineness made Anne seem more than ever awkward of manner and uncouth of speech. But Anne faced the duty she owed her father and tried her best to be a friend to the young wife. She failed, but it was not her fault. Phyllis was not only trying to live with but she took a positive dislike to Anne and was so insolent, so sarcastic, and so severely critical that Anne was obliged to give up the struggle and had to fight to preserve her own rights and her own self-respect.

As far as possible this state of things had been kept from Montcalm Nichols. Both women loved him, and both tried to behave in his presence as if their relations were friendly. If Nichols had suspected that his wife and daughter were at variance, he had never said so, and when together the trio had been amicable and even affectionate.

The servants knew and were fiercely partisan. Phyllis's maid, Lisette, was the confidential and helpful conspirator; while Nanna, who had been Anne's nurse and was now her maid, was equally a faithful and secretive ally.

Nichols's valet, Eugene, was too wise to side with either of these women servants, and kept his own counsel. This valet even was now hovering over the body of his dead master, out of his element, entirely,

and for once at a loss to know the proper formula. How could even the most experienced of valets minister to a dead man?

A nod toward the small dressing room and a slight glance of inquiry toward Sheriff Gorton was all that was necessary to receive his answering inclination of the head, and Anne Nichols went into her father's presence.

"Oh, Miss Anne, isn't it too terrible?" began Eugene, swept out of his usual self-effacement by the tragedy.

She gave him a cold glance and said, "Leave the room." Anne couldn't be gracious, it wasn't in her make-up.

She stepped nearer to her father and gazed down upon him. His long, thin face, hardened by the hand of death, and not yet softened by the ministrations of the mortician, wore an expression of dissatisfaction, of eternal unrest. At least, that's how it seemed to his daughter, and she gave only a brief shuddering look at him and returned to the living room.

The great room, massively appointed with priceless rugs, rare lamps and vases, and few but famous pieces of furniture, seemed an inappropriate setting for the girl who came in with careless stride and stood, her hands on her hips, before Coroner Flint.

"Who's in charge? You?" she asked, abruptly.

"Sheriff Gorton and myself," Flint told her. "Will

you be good enough to sit down, Miss Nichols, and answer a few questions? We have to go through this routine work, you know, and I beg you won't delay us unnecessarily."

"Who's delaying you? Go right ahead."

"Very well, then. You say Mrs. Nichols was out last evening?"

"She was. I was in my sitting room, upstairs, and I heard her run downstairs and out at the side door."

"Why, then, did she deny this?"

"Heavens, I don't know. Ask her. I only say I know she did do that, for I heard her."

"Did you see her?"

"No. But I know her step, it could have been no one else."

"Have you any idea where she went?"

"No; how could I have?"

"Do you know with whom she went?"

"I probably do, but I don't propose to tell you. It has no bearing on the matter of my father's death."

"Allow me to be the judge of that. With whom did she go?"

"I refuse to tell. You must ask her."

Flint let that go, and proceeded with other inquiries.

"Did you hear Mrs. Nichols come back to the house?"

Anne looked uncertain.

"I really don't know that. I think I did, but it may have been someone else."

"Your father?"

"Oh, no, he always comes to the front door, if he's walking. I heard someone come in a car on the side drive, but I paid no attention and I've no idea who it was. Perhaps some of the servants."

"They have cars?"

"Oh, yes. And it may have been Phyllis, herself. I can't say."

"Is she in the habit of going out with men other than her husband?"

But Anne Nichols was not so easily trapped. "I didn't say she went out with a man," she rasped at him.

"Not likely to go with a woman, was she?"

"Well, no."

"Then, as I say, was she in the habit of going out like that?"

"She was. She went out every chance she got."

"And Mr. Nichols didn't know it?"

"He did not. She's a sly one, and a bad one. Look here, Mr. Coroner, was my father murdered?"

"Yes, Miss Nichols, we are obliged to conclude that he was."

"Then she did it. Phyllis did it."

"Don't be hasty. And don't speak so loudly. These are not assertions to be made at the top of your lungs."

Also, they are not assertions you can make without something to back them up. Have you any right or reason to make these accusations against your step-mother?"

"Only that I know her. She is a gold-digger. She married my father for his money, and she is tired of her bargain, and wants to keep the money but not the man. Can't you see that?"

"Wait a moment, Miss Nichols. Who was with her last night? Having said so much as you have, you must say more. Come, now, who was it?"

"I don't know, really. I can guess, but you don't want a guess. And there are several beaux of hers with whom she goes joy-riding as soon as Father's back is turned."

"Then why did he turn his back?"

"Oh, he didn't know it, I'm almost sure of that. He thought, I've often heard him say it, that he'd better take an evening off now and then. Give Phyllis a chance to know how she missed him. Missed him!"

"He was away often?"

"No, not often at all. Only for the Saturday-night poker games over at Dr. Sherrill's. Where is the doctor? I thought he was here."

"No, he went home. Is he one of Mrs. Nichols' admirers?"

"I'll say he is! They run around together a lot, daytimes, when Father is in the city."

"He went down every day?"

"No, only some days. Lots of days off in the summer time, of course. But the doctor is her tame cat. How she can stand that gingery hair!"

"Your father had no notion that Dr. Sherrill admired his wife?"

"Oh, Lord, no. Phyllis is a cute one. She pulled the wool over Dad's eyes, I can tell you!"

"And he had no idea that his wife—er—ran around with other men?"

"Oh, well, I don't say 'ran around' in any serious sense. Just a ride now and then, or somebody dropping in to tea, or for a game of tennis."

"No harm in that?"

"No." But the tone of Anne Nichols's voice and the curl of her lip gave her negative reply all the intent of a positive accusation.

Suddenly she seemed to lose all interest in the doings of her stepmother and leaned toward Coroner Flint as she whispered:

"What about my father's will?"

Flint was shocked at the eager attitude of the girl and her evident interest in the disposal of her father's fortune, but he was keenly alert to the developments that might ensue.

"Where is the will?" he asked, in a casual way.

"At the lawyer's office."

"Your father was a lawyer himself."

"Of course," impatiently. "But he didn't draw up his own will. Mr. Barton did. Grosvenor Barton. Can't you call him up and get him here?"

"All in good time. Why are you so anxious? Don't you know the terms of the will?"

"No, that's just what I don't know. But of course Phyllis and I share the estate. There's nobody else, except some distant relatives and the servants."

"Then why the haste to learn its details? You know you'll be provided for."

"Yes"—the plain face of the girl took on a stubborn look—"but I want to know just exactly how matters stand."

"You'll have to wait a bit. Do you realize that this is a murder case? That we must seek the murderer—the criminal?"

"I do, but you don't!" she flashed back at him. "What are you doing to find your murderer? What steps are you taking——"

Sheriff Gorton intervened.

"We will do the questioning, if you please, Miss Nichols. Do you know that Mr. Carman was also killed last night? At about the same time as your father and in the same way?"

Anne turned a perturbed face to him.

"I heard you mention it before I came downstairs. Who killed him?"

"We don't know, but it may have been the same murderer."

"Oh, no! Phyllis never killed Mr. Carman! Why would she?"

"I didn't kill Monty, either," Phyllis said, appearing suddenly at the head of the stairs. It seemed these two were forever hanging over the banisters, listening.

The newly made widow came on down slowly. She was all in white, a simple sports suit of *crêpe de Chine* whose straight severe lines suited her lovely lissome figure. A huge handkerchief of black chiffon fluttered at her side, one corner tucked through her watch bracelet.

"Now, Anne," she said, in a gentle, chiding tone, "you may as well stop accusing me. You know and these men know I didn't. I couldn't kill anybody!" The last statement, accompanied by a childish outspreading of her hands, was so obviously true that both coroner and sheriff involuntarily nodded in acquiescence. "But," she turned to Flint, "aren't you going to make any arrangements? Aren't you going to have a trial, or whatever you call it? And when will be the funeral?"

A strange family, Flint decided. One asking for the will, the other calmly inquiring as to proceedings.

"An inquest, you mean, Mrs. Nichols, not a trial. Yes, we shall have that, and it seems to me the in-

quest on the two men will be simultaneous. Think so, Gorton?"

"Yes," said the sheriff, heavily. He still seemed stunned, unable to comprehend fully what he had to do.

"Yes," he repeated, "we must have the two inquests together, and soon, say to-morrow."

"The sooner the better," Flint said. "Once that's over, my responsibility ceases, and I'll not be sorry."

"And mine begins," groaned Gorton. "I hope an inspector comes from Hartford soon. I've had all I want of murder cases!"

Phyllis Nichols looked at him quickly.

"An inspector from Hartford?" she repeated. "Why do you need him, Sheriff Gorton?"

"To do the necessary work," he replied, with a dogged shake of his head. "It's too many for me. I'm not able to take care of it."

"Take care of what?"

"Finding the murderer, ma'am."

"Must he be found?" The lovely voice fell to a soft coo. "Why? It can't restore my husband to life. Why care who did it?"

"Don't you care?" said Flint, sternly, turning on her a sharp glance. "Have you no desire to avenge your husband's death?"

"No," she said, with a sad little sigh. "It only prolongs the tragedy, keeps me in nervous suspense,

and makes it harder for everybody. Why not let it go? I am the one to be considered, and I feel that as no discovery of the criminal can give me back my lost one, I would rather the case should be closed and let it remain unsolved."

"You do!" cried Anne. "You feel that way, do you? Then let me tell you that it matters not how you feel. I've something to say, and I say the murderer of my father shall be found and brought to justice and receive the punishment due his terrible crime."

Phyllis turned perfectly white save for two spots of softly blended pink rouge on her cheeks. She tried to speak but no words came.

"As it happens," Gorton said, harshly, "neither of you have anything to say as to how this affair shall be conducted. You will both appear at the inquest to-morrow. After that, you may make funeral arrangements to suit your own convenience. But don't talk about directing the ways and means of justice. That will be attended to for you."

The way this speech was received was a direct guide to the characters of these two girls. Anne looked satisfied, but showed a dull, stolid face, unrelieved by any glimmer of alert hope or even real intelligence. Phyllis, on the other hand, seemed brimming over with sudden ideas. She started to say one thing, then paused and began on some other

subject, until Gorton was forced to ask her to be silent.

"Where will the inquest be held?" she asked, unheeding his reprimands.

"I think at the Town Hall."

"My word! Really? Why, it's like a—a——"

"Function," supplied Anne. "I suppose you're thinking what to wear! Phyllis, sometimes I think you're hardly human!!"

Phyllis gave a little ringing laugh.

"Anne, dear, that's just what I sometimes think about you."

"I must look about," said Flint, after a glance of annoyance at the two quarrelsome girls.

He rose slowly, shook himself after the manner of a weary dog, and stalked around the room.

"What are you looking for?" asked Phyllis, with quick interest.

"For your husband's desk or writing table."

"What do you want of that?"

"It is necessary that I glance over his recent correspondence and——"

"You shall do nothing of the sort! I forbid it! What colossal impertinence!"

"Mrs. Nichols—" Flint spoke very sternly now—"apparently you don't grasp the situation at all. You cannot put obstructions in the path of justice, and you need not try."

Her face turned to him with the expression of an

unjustly punished child. Her great eyes showed unshed tears and her curved lips quivered.

Angry at himself for being moved by this pathetic picture, he nevertheless involuntarily changed his tone for a much softer one and said:

"So, please be guided by me. Rest assured, I will do my best to save and protect you from all unpleasantness and publicity."

Anne laughed outright.

"Don't do that!" she cried, in a sardonic voice. "Publicity is what she wants, what she thrives on! Give her the limelight, if you want to please her."

Phyllis turned to Flint with an eloquent glance that said, unmistakably, "You see what I have to put up with!"

But the coroner was fed up with perverse femininity and he went on with his search. A few steps brought him to a room adjoining the big living room, whose furnishings showed it beyond doubt the master's office, study, or den, whatever it might be called. Though in perfect order it was pleasantly informal, and its appointments were fine and harmonious as well as comfortable. A big flat-topped desk occupied the middle of the room, and on this were the usual paraphernalia and some letters in wire baskets and others under paper weights.

"Had Mr. Nichols a secretary?" asked Flint, looking back at the others.

"Not a regular one," chirped Phyllis. "I mean not one living in the house. Miss Kendrick came every day for some dictation and all that. Of course she isn't here to-day. Want to see her?"

"No," said Flint, and then he closed the door, almost with a slam. "That Voice With the Smile gets on my nerves!" he said to himself.

But with the shutting of the door he quickly achieved his accustomed poise and calm. Once more he was the hard-headed, hard-hearted man of justice, and he set to work on the desk before him. His experienced hands quickly went through the packets of bills, letters, and papers, his sharp eyes ready to pounce on anything that might be of importance to his search, but he found nothing. So far as he could gather, Montcalm Nichols's life and affairs were an open book. Papers and letters were innocuous, and neatly sorted and filed.

Flint was not fooled. He well knew if there were secrets in Nichols's life they would not be evident from his desk papers here. They would be got at by going to his business office in New York, or his safety-deposit boxes, or his safe. Yet he felt a vague disappointment in turning up nothing but tailors' bills or club notices.

He sat ruminating, glad of a few moments alone.

Sorting out his mental notes, he realized that he must get ahead with his inquest arrangements. That

was the first duty. Then after the inevitable adjournment he could get some of the big detectives on the homicide squad, some important inspector from headquarters, some experienced, clever commander who would know what to do. A county coroner, after all, unless he has had at least one murder case, can't be expected to tackle a great double-decked affair like this.

If only he *could* swing it!

The thought was dazzling in its possibilities, but a moment's consideration showed him it held only impossibilities. No, it was all too much for him. He must do his plain duty, so far as he could, and leave the rest to his superiors.

With a final sigh, he rose and opened the door again.

CHAPTER VI

THE TWIN DAGGER

WHEN the coroner rejoined the group in the living room he found it augmented by another man.

Peter Carman sat beside Phyllis, quite evidently engaged in trying to comfort and cheer her. In his zealous concern, he seemed to have forgotten the fact that the hand of death had also struck at his own home.

"Who's in charge over at your house?" Flint asked, abruptly, fairly beside himself with uncertainties as to his immediate duty.

"That trooper chap, Malloy. He's good stuff, too. And the undertaker's people are there. Aunt Kate is bracing up and Peggy is a little brick. I say, did the same brute do in both these men?"

Flint didn't answer this, but said, instead:

"How did you happen to come over here?"

"Phyllis—er—Mrs. Nichols telephoned me, and I ran across to see if I could be of any help."

"And how do you propose to help?"

"Oh, come now Flint, don't be stuffy. I'll bet

you'd be glad of a helping hand. And I know a bit about detective work——”

“H'm. Read all the new thrillers, I s'pose?”

“Well, one could do worse. Those writer fellows know a bit about detective principles, which, maybe, is more than you do.”

“That's so, Carman.” Flint looked positively abject. “This affair is too much for me, and I'm ready to admit it. I can do my coroner stuff, you know, but I'm no detective.”

“Oh, well, you don't have to be. The state authorities will take the thing up.”

Carman returned to his occupation of comforting Phyllis, which he seemed to think could best be accomplished by holding her hand. Her reactions to this procedure were just what might have been expected. She would let her hand rest confidently in his for a moment, like a fluttering dove, and then draw it away, with a heart-breaking sigh and a pathetic look of desolation. This meant he must recapture the errant fingers and the game began all over again.

With a sniff at this byplay, Anne Nichols said, sharply:

“I say, Pete, if you really do know anything about detecting, here's a chance to prove it. Your father and mine, killed in the same way, at the same time and by the same means. There's a situation for you.”

"By the same means? Was he?" asked Pete, who had not heard all the details.

"Yes," Gorton told him, for Flint had gone into another room.

"A dagger, then?"

"Yes, and a dagger as nearly as possible like the one that did for Mr. Carman."

"Let me see it. Where is it?"

Seeming to forget Phyllis for the moment, the young man started to his feet. Not unwilling to be alone with Peter Carman, the sheriff took him into the room where Nichols's body lay and closed the door.

The dagger, which had been removed from the dead man, had been carefully wrapped and laid aside for further investigation.

Watching Peter keenly, Gorton undid the parcel and showed the weapon.

"It's not only similar, it's precisely the same," said Carman, staring at the ugly blade with its gruesome stains.

"Yes, and that's what makes this whole thing so unbelievable. As you know, the exact hour of death cannot be positively fixed, but Flint is experienced enough to get it pretty near right."

"And what does he say?" whispered the other, a scared look coming into his black eyes.

"He says Mr. Nichols was killed between one and

two o'clock, and he said Mr. Carman was killed between one and two o'clock."

"I don't believe he can tell so close as that," said Pete, slowly. "Do you?"

"I think he can come fairly near it. But what matter? They were both killed last night. We don't know which one was killed first. We don't know whether the same man killed both or not. But we do know that the daggers are the same—identical, you say?"

"Yes. Exactly alike. I looked at the one over home very carefully."

"It's over there yet?"

"Yes, Malloy has it in his care. My God, Sheriff, who did this thing?"

"Have you no idea?"

"Heavens, no!" Pete exclaimed, but the sheriff noted the rising color and the startled eyes.

"You know," Gorton went on, quietly, "if you do know anything, you'd a whole lot better tell it. This thing will be ferreted out to the last point, and anything you keep back or conceal will be a black mark for you."

"All right then, Sheriff, here you are."

Slowly, Carman drew from his pocket an old-fashioned watch key and handed it over.

"What's this?" was Gorton's mystified exclamation. "Why, it's a watch key! I haven't seen one for years! Where'd you get it?"

"I picked it up here—outside the front door, as I was coming in."

"On the porch—there isn't any porch. Do you mean on that stone pavement in front of the door?"

"Just off the edge of those stones. They're level with the ground, but I spied this shining in the sunlight and it drew my attention. I picked it up, wondering who dropped it."

"The murderer, perhaps. In that case he's an old-fashioned guy. Nobody has a key-winding watch nowadays."

"That's what struck me funny. I felt sure it couldn't be Mr. Nichols' property."

"Maybe it was dropped by some guest or some stranger calling."

"Well, you must find out. It ought to be a good clue. I can show you exactly where it was."

"You can? Sure you didn't put it there yourself?"

To Gorton's surprise, Pete took no offence at this implication.

"I suppose you have to suspect everybody," he said, with a bored smile. "Well, go ahead. You quizzed me pretty well when you were over at my home——"

"And got nowhere," growled the harassed sheriff. "Clues don't amount to much. Flint banks on a dead rose picked up on your porch, but I don't reckon it'll hang anybody. Motive, that's the thing."

"Who banged that into your head?" asked Pete; "and it's a good steer at that. But how're you going about it to find the motive? I say, Gorton, are you going to separate these two cases or work 'em out together?"

"Together, Flint says. He's going to hold one inquest for the two of them to-morrow, I think. Say, Pete, I don't suspect you, really, but if you've got any ideas do let me have 'em."

"I gave you a clue and you said it was no good; also you implied that I planted it myself. Would I be likely to help an ungrateful chap like that?"

"Well, there may be something learned from that watch key. You see, if these two men had a common enemy, and he killed both of them—old feud, you know, or long-time search for 'em—he would be an old fellow himself. How old was your dad?"

"About fifty. Nichols about the same, I think. I suppose some men of that age still use a watch key. But not likely. Only the old G. A. R. veterans would stick to an old watch. It would be a gift watch, of course, with an inscription and dates——"

"You've got an imagination!" declared Gorton. "But I've no time now to listen to your fairy stories. I'll keep the watch key, and if you placed it there, be sure I'll find it out."

"But I didn't, Sheriff, honest I didn't. If I'd

thought you'd act like this I never would have given it to you. Let me have it back."

"Not much. It may be of greatest importance, and it may be a dud. Now look here, Carman, are you helping us to track down the murderer or murderers of your father and Mr. Nichols, or aren't you? I want to know where we stand."

"Why, I'll do anything I can, but I'm not a real detective, and I don't want to go into the thing and mess it all up."

"Where were you last evening?"

"I told you all that when you were over at the house."

"Not all."

"What did I leave out?"

"Where you were from say about ten o'clock to twelve."

"Oh, fiddle strings, I don't know. I was trailing around the different clubs and all, waiting till it was late enough to go over to the Small Hours. No fun going there too early. I say, this isn't an inquisition, is it?"

"No. But you'll be quizzed, all right. Now, don't say a word to anyone about this little key."

"Sure I will. Why not? I found it, it's no secret. Or if it is, it isn't your secret, it's mine. I expect to find out who carries a key-winding watch, and—there you are!"

"What about Dr. Sherrill?" said Gorton, suddenly, even explosively, as he paused, with one hand on the knob of the door.

"Well, what about him? Anything?"

"You remember, your maid said she saw him take a paper from your father's pocket, after—after he was dead."

"By Jove, so she did," cried Pete. "And Martha's nobody's fool. If she said Sherrill took a paper, Sherrill did take a paper. Maybe it was all right—a prescription, or something like that——"

"Nonsense, it was no prescription! If it was anything it was something more valuable than that."

"You're accusing Sherrill—Dr. Sherrill of——"

"I'm not accusing anybody of anything. But that paper must be explained. Come on, now, let's get out of here. I just wanted you to compare this dagger with the one used on your father."

"It's the twin of it. I say, Gorto, In do want to help. I'm more cut up than you think over my dad's death."

"He wasn't really your father."

"The only father I've ever known. I was legally adopted, and I've all the rights of a real son."

"You inherit his money?"

A red flush swept over Pete's face.

"A share of it," he said, haughtily. "His sister and daughter are his principal heirs." Apparently

annoyed, the young man himself grasped the door-knob and hurried into the other room. There he found Flint talking earnestly to Eugene the valet.

"You dressed your master last evening?" he was saying.

"Yes," Eugene replied, not rude of tone, but indifferent as to his mode of address.

"He went to Dr. Sherrill's?"

"Yes."

"What hat did he wear?"

To the amazement of Flint and also of Pete Carman, who chanced to face the valet as he entered, the man was seized with a most violent embarrassment.

He screwed his hands together, his eyes rolled about, and his mouth contorted into an expression that denoted abject fear.

"What's the matter?" growled Flint at him, "can't you answer a simple question?"

"He wore a—a soft hat, sir," Eugene stammered, now all servility of demeanor.

"Light or dark?"

"A—a light one, sir, gray."

"Where is it?"

"In—in the master's hat cupboard, sir."

"Get it."

The valet ran upstairs and soon reappeared with the hat.

Flint stared at it, wondering what had so roused the man's emotions.

Phyllis, nestled in the depths of a great easy chair, gazed at Eugene curiously. Anne, near by, paid not the slightest attention.

"Where did you find it?" pursued Flint, feeling there was some information to be gained here, but having no notion how to extract it from this unhelpful servant.

"On the hat tree," said Eugene, beginning to regain his calm.

"Who put it there?"

"Pitts did," and the voice was steady now. Evidently, the danger, whatever it had been, was past.

"Why?"

"He told me afterward that when he saw Mr. Nichols on the ground and his hat rolled off him, he picked up the hat, unconscious-like, and hung it on the hat tree in the hall."

"Natural enough," murmured Flint. "Well, why did you remove it?"

"I thought it my business to do so, sir. The master's hats never hung in the hall, and I brushed it and cleaned it and put it away where it belonged."

"Cleaned it? Of what?"

"Of some slight smudges of dirt. It had rolled over the stones, you know."

"Hats don't roll, unless in a strong wind."

Eugene shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't say, sir. But it showed a bit of grime, which I cleaned off."

There really seemed nothing suspicious in all this, and Flint could see nothing unusual or peculiar about the hat, so he returned it to the valet, wondering deeply why he had been so alarmed at first.

"There's something queer about that hat business," he told himself. "That smart Aleck of a valet knows more than appears on the surface."

And the self-satisfied smile as the smart Aleck received the hat made Flint think of "the smile on the face of the tiger."

But it was all too much for him. A detective might see through or into these things but they were entirely opaque to Flint's mental vision.

He had examined all the contents of the dead man's pockets. Not one iota of information had he gained in this way. It seemed to him no human being could carry more ordinary, commonplace, and rational belongings than Montcalm Nichols had carried. Handkerchiefs, keys, money, pencil, watch, cigarette lighter—there was positively no unusual or eccentric piece of property and no pocketbook or lettercase of any sort.

"Didn't Mr. Nichols carry a wallet?" Flint had asked.

And the mildly reproachful glance of the valet was with him still as he remembered the answer:

“Not with evening dress, sir.”

Now what more was there to do? To be sure, the search through Mr. Nichols’s own rooms had been hasty. Bedroom, dressing room, and bath, all had been inspected and nothing had been found that could have any bearing on the mystery of his death.

Nor had Flint expected it. Clearly, the circumstances were unmistakable. Nichols had been returning home from the poker party. About to enter his own house, he had been attacked and stabbed in the back by a level-headed and cold-blooded murderer.

No quarrel had taken place—so far as could be discerned—no struggle for life. All pointed to the facts of a swift, silent approach and a quick death-blow that gave the victim no time or opportunity for even a cry of agony. Then the man had fallen, there at his own door. His hat had dropped from his head, but no other disturbance could be noted.

Premeditated, of course. More, most carefully planned and meticulously carried out. Only extreme hate or revenge could have prompted such a deed.

And John Carman the same. He, too, had been at his own doorway. About to use his latchkey, he had been struck down in the same quick, sure fashion,

and by the same kind of weapon. Again a strong, fiendish motive was obvious.

The twin daggers implied the same murderer, but as Flint got thus far with his whirling thoughts they became unmanageable, and he could think of no person, no sort of person who would be so anxious to compass the death of these two men that he would commit these two brutal crimes.

"Wake up, Flint," said Gorton, brusquely, well knowing that his colleague was far from being asleep.

"Yes, yes," the coroner said, pulling himself together. "Now, we'll go back to the Carman house, I think. I want to check up a little more over there. Nobody here must leave this house for the present. Remember that, Mrs. Nichols and Miss Nichols."

"Not go outdoors!" wailed Phyllis, her lovely lips pouting. "Oh, I'd die, cooped up here!"

"You may go out in the gardens, but you may not leave the place. Remember!"

"They can't get out," Gorton growled. "It'll be patrolled."

"You come with me, Carman," Flint went on, greatly to the discomfiture of that young man, who had telegraphed to Phyllis's eyes his intention to stand by.

But before further plans were made, two exceedingly official-looking personages appeared. Coming in, they seemed to take possession of the house and

all its inmates. Both Flint and Gorton drew great sighs of relief, and as they might get rid of a discarded garment they threw all responsibility on the newcomers.

The newcomers were Inspector Wall and Detective Sergeant Stimson from State Headquarters, and if their ability was commensurate with even one half of the official importance they seemed to show, they would speedily corral any murderer. The inspector, with broad shoulders and well-knit frame, had a large mobile face that was deceptively cordial. It had often been said that he got round people by smiling at them, but once round them, the smile faded. His shrewd gray eyes, while seeming to look pensively into the distance, had a way of missing nothing that came into their angle of vision. His manners were irreproachable. Nobody could long be gruff or surly with Inspector Wall; he had a way with him, and he made use of it. In less than five minutes of his entrance he had made friends with Phyllis, interested Anne, comforted Gorton and Flint, and almost hypnotized young Carman.

He was ably seconded by his sergeant detective. Stimson was a younger man, and more noticeably alert. His deep blue eyes were eloquent of whatever emotion he wanted to register at the moment. His face could show sympathy and understanding even while he was leading a witness to his own undoing,

and no facial expression or muscular gesture ever escaped his notice.

The two men, like all good policemen, were ever avid to work on an interesting case, and they were quite ready to agree that the present mystery certainly had its points of intrigue. Rapidly, at their request, the sheriff and the coroner told them the main details. Now and then they asked a question or two of the ladies of the household, or of Pete Carman, and once the sergeant slipped away upstairs, leaving Wall talking. On Stimson's return he seated himself near Phyllis and said, casually:

"Were you expecting a present from your husband?"

She stared at him an instant, and then said:

"Yes, I was! How could you know that? Oh, you are a real detective, aren't you?"

"I don't know yet," Stimson returned, guardedly. "When did you expect to get it?"

"To-morrow is my birthday. He had promised me a——"

"A pendant?" asked Stimson.

"Yes," and again the puzzled little face regarded him as one might look at a sorcerer.

"Had he bought it yet?"

"I don't know—I couldn't——"

"Couldn't find it when you hunted for it?" asked Stimson, and his eyes smiled at her.

"Well, it was mine! So I did hunt for it," she defended herself.

"Call Eugene back," Stimson said, for he had heard all the story of the valet's uneasiness at being questioned.

The man came in, debonair and smiling.

But his face changed when the detective said, "What did you do with the jewel, my man?"

"Wh— what jewel?"

"You know very well. The gift your master bought for his wife's birthday."

"I know nothing of any such matter and I fail to understand your meaning."

"Oh, no, you don't fail to understand at all. Now produce the jewel or we shall search your belongings and root it out."

The valet weakened under this straightforward talk, and he was about to speak when the telephone bell rang.

Pitts appeared, saying, "Mr. Flint is wanted."

"Take it here," suggested the inspector, and the coroner did so.

But the message he received so overcame him that he half rose from the chair he was in and held out the instrument for anyone to take that would.

Inspector Wall grasped it and spoke into the transmitter end.

"What!" he cried. "Say that again! Yes, yes—I hear, go on."

A further message ensued, and the big man's face grew more and more grave.

"Hold everything. We'll be right there," he said.

Then he turned to the listening group.

"Antony Dane has just been found murdered," he told them. "On his doorstep. Stabbed in the back with a dagger."

Phyllis shrieked and Pete Carman flew to her side and put his arm round her.

Anne Nichols made no sound, but gripped the arm of her chair and sat motionless, with a drawn, strained face.

"Gorton," the inspector said, giving orders like a general, "look after that valet. He is a thief. What more he is, I do not know yet. Everybody who was in this house at midnight last night must remain here for the present. Flint, come with us. Let the local constable take charge here. Come, Stimson." And like a whirlwind they were gone.

CHAPTER VII

ON THE DANEWOOD DOORSTEP

THOUGH not allowed to enter the Nichols gates, there was a straggling crowd peeping in from the street. Nor were they all country yokels and rustics. Many of the villagers, especially young people, were unable to resist the lure to walk along the north side of the green.

The calm church clock broadcast the hour of ten on the crisp October air and windows and doors were being flung open as the later risers awakened to their Sunday morning.

"Hold on, Inspector," said Flint, as he saw the street crowds. "Let's go by the back way. There's a mob in front."

The coroner wheeled, went back through the Nichols house, and down the garden path at the rear. From here they could hasten through the gardens of the three or four estates that intervened before Danewood was reached. The inspector hurried along after the guiding Flint, but the more esthetic-minded Stimson gazed around in a sort of rapture at the successive vistas.

The three men hurried on, Flint pouring forth a torrent of information regarding the other two tragedies and speculation as to this third one. A few servants and possibly some of their masters from the house windows might have resented the trespassing trio but no obstacle was put in their way.

On they went, Flint, seemingly by intuition, finding a garden gate or a low wall between the gardens and lawns, and at last they reached the great park of Danewood.

"Around front," the inspector ordered, and in a moment they came upon a group surveying the third tragedy.

The house was pure Colonial, of the most elaborate type. The semi-circular front porch with its six tall columns was glistening white in the sunlight and the long façade was gay with striped awnings and floral window boxes. A great circle of broad shallow steps led to the low porch, and the three men abated their haste as they stepped up with awe and reverence.

The group fell back, and exposed to view the huddled form of Antony Dane, piteously contorted and showing a dagger hilt protruding from his back.

"Just like the other two," said Flint, staring. "What *does* it mean?"

Inspector Wall, after a brief but comprehensive glance at the dead man, straightened up and looked about him. He noticed, first of all, that the scene on

the porch was not visible from the street. Though the front park was a wide expanse of perfect lawn, the driveway formed a circle in front of the steps, and this circle was filled with evergreen trees. These formed a complete screen, and as the front gates were guarded no intruders could interrupt.

"Who is in charge here?" asked Wall, in a quiet, businesslike tone.

"You, Bob," Guy Lawson said to his cousin.

"I suppose I am," Phillips returned. "Well, Inspector, I'm Anthony Dane's nephew. I live here with him. My name is Robert Phillips. I can tell you nothing about this—this death of my uncle, for I know nothing. But I will answer any questions you may ask—if I can."

The inspector looked at him for a moment thoughtfully and then turned to Guy.

"You, sir?" he said, seeming disinclined to waste words.

"I am also a nephew," Guy Lawson told him. "I do not live here, but at a house in the village, Mrs. Payne's. My cousin telephoned me about this about half an hour ago and I came right here."

Wall gave him the same scrutiny he had given the other. They were very different in appearance, these young men cousins, and Lawson was far more distinguished-looking and of better presence. Yet Phillips was frank and unembarrassed of manner,

and Stimson, watching both, could see nothing to criticize in the demeanor of either.

"Who found Mr. Dane's body?" asked Wall, whose questions were always straightforward.

"I, sir," and a big, capable-looking man stepped a little forward. "I am Marley, the butler. I open the front door rather late on Sunday mornings, and when I did so to-day, I saw Mr. Dane there, just as you see him now."

"You didn't move him?"

"No, sir," said Marley, with a slightly injured air, as if resentful of the idea that his universal knowledge should not include the etiquette of criminology.

"The screen door is still closed," went on Wall. "Mr. Dane's body lies against it. How did you come through?"

"I didn't, sir," said Marley, simply. "When I saw what I saw, I went through to the back door, and then came round the house. When I discovered that Mr. Dane was dead, I touched him no more than to feel his pulse. His hand was cold. Then I went straight to tell Mr. Phillips."

"Take it up from here, Mr. Phillips."

Wall's manner was so curt as to be almost blunt, yet it carried no hint of rudeness, and his calm, even suave, voice and dignified bearing commanded respect at once.

"Yes." Bob looked a little less sure of himself. He fingered the tiny rosebud in his buttonhole, and suddenly seemed to think it out of place in the circumstances. He took it out, and with a jerk, threw it out on the lawn.

"Yes," he repeated, "I was in bed, sound asleep. Major shook me——"

"Major?" asked Wall, dubiously.

"Oh, yes. Well, you see," Bob gave one of his irresistible smiles, "you see, Marley, here, we call Major Domo, and Mead," indicating by a nod of his head another man, clearly a lesser servant, "we call Minor Domo. These two chaps run the house for us."

"I see," said Wall. "Go on, Mr. Phillips."

"Well, that's about all. Major shook me till I woke up and then he told me of Uncle Antony's death, and of course I dressed and came right down here. I came around the house, too. We haven't opened the screen door at all. Well, then I telephoned Guy, of course, and he dressed and came over here as quick as he could. We haven't done anything since. We tried to eat some breakfast, but we couldn't make a go of it. So we came back around here and sat on the steps."

"I see. Thank you for a clear and concise story. Now, Coroner Flint will take charge here, and I will ask you all to come inside the house while I put a few

more questions. You have your mind made up, Flint?"

"Indeed, yes. Mr. Dane died, to all intent and appearance, exactly as Mr. Carman did and Mr. Nichols did."

"What!" cried Lawson. "Is Carman dead, too?"

"Yes, didn't you know it?"

"No, I knew Nichols was, for I saw the crowd as I passed the house, but I didn't pass Carman's——"

Guy's always white face seemed to turn whiter still, and his black hair and beard stood out in sharp contrast.

"Did you walk here?" asked Stimson. "Where do you live?"

"I walked part way, and then a man I knew was passing in a small car, and he brought me the rest of the way. He told me of Nichols, but I don't think he knew about Carman. Are there any more? Oh, you asked me where I live. Down at the end of the green, Inspector. Mrs. Payne's cottage. Less than half a mile away. Do you say the other two were killed in this same way?"

Bob Phillips, too, had paled, and listened for the inspector's reply.

"Yes. I have never heard of a more terrible affair. The three men, friends, I am told, were each killed on his own doorstep, each with a dagger in his back, and the daggers all alike."

"My uncle and John Carman and Monty Nichols,"

said Guy, in an awed tone. "It seems incredible! Do you suppose there will be more such deaths discovered?"

"Impossible to say," returned Wall, speaking gently, for it was plain to be seen that these two men were not callous or indifferent but were restraining their real feelings.

"You can open this screen door now," said the coroner, as he moved the body sufficiently for this to be done.

"Let us go inside," said the inspector, squaring his broad shoulders and stepping toward the house.

Mead, the footman, commonly called Minor Domo, opened the screen, and as the other doors were already open they went in.

"This way," Bob said, leading them toward a large, delightful sun parlor. It was paved with irregular-shaped stones and furnished with painted wicker and chintz cushions. Palms and flowers were about, and all the smaller details that make for comfort and luxury of living. Not an unusual room, except that all the appointments had been chosen with care and good taste, making a harmonious and attractive resting place.

Inspector Wall quickly moved a few pieces of furniture until he sat at a table with Stimson near by and the rest of the party facing them.

"I may see fit to question you separately later,"

Wall said, "but now the information must be general. Are there any more important servants? I mean head ones?"

"Only the housekeeper," volunteered Marley. "She is one of us."

"Call her in," said Wall. "Also any who may have waited on Mr. Dane last evening. Now, Mr. Phillips, as to last evening? Were you at home?"

Bob looked up quickly. He had a shrewd suspicion that the inspector knew where the evening had been spent. He must know, if he had talked at all to the households of the other two men who were dead. But he was not sure just when Wall had come into the matter. Of course, they were all out-of-towners—where was the village constable? Wasn't there usually a sheriff? He began to feel bewildered and he showed it.

Guy Lawson helped him out.

"We were all together, Inspector," he said. "I mean, my uncle, my cousin, and myself. Also we were in company with the two other men, who, you tell me, have also been killed, Mr. Nichols and Mr. Carman. The sixth of our party was Dr. Sherrill, who was also our host. He lives at the inn, across the green."

"Yes. And this party—it was a party?"

"It was a poker game, and was a regular Saturday-night affair. Not a party, in the sense of a social

function, but a friendly game that we have played every Saturday night all summer."

"I see. Now tell me of your breaking up and your home-coming."

So Lawson gave a short but careful account of the way the little group had disbanded and gone their several ways.

"Who left first?" asked Wall.

"I did," Bob Phillips said. "I had a toothache, and I hustled home to get a remedy. I came across the green by a short cut."

"Who next?"

"I," Guy told him. "I was going on to a night club, it was about midnight then. I called a taxicab and I made one stop, at the drug store for some cigarettes, and then went on out to the club."

"What club?"

"The Small Hours Club. Out on the Gordon Valley Road."

"Then you don't know as to the further proceedings of the men still left?"

"No; except that I know what they almost invariably did. As a rule, the three of them walked around the long end of the green together, each dropping off at his own house. That has been their custom, and they seldom deviated from it."

"Then, Mr. Phillips, you reached here some time before your uncle did?"

"Yes," Bob said. "I came home as quickly as I could. I had my toothache drops from my dentist here. I used them and went straight to bed. The medicine so relieved my pain that I slept soundly all night."

"And knew nothing until the man called you a short time ago?"

"That's right."

"And you, Mr. Lawson? How late did you remain at the club?"

"Until about three o'clock. I may as well admit that I was feeling a bit hilarious. I didn't look at my watch, but I know that the club closes at three and I was one of the last to leave."

"Thank you. It is necessary to get this routine straight. Now for another phase of the matter: Have either of you two young men any idea who could or would have killed your uncle?"

"No!" said the two cousins in concert.

Lawson's face was set and grim, while Bob's, no less vindictive, showed a quivering lip and a pulsing vein in his throat.

"I don't want to interrupt," Guy said, hesitantly, and the shrewd and watchful Stimson decided that the interruption was to ease up things for Cousin Bob, "but do you say the weapons in the three cases are alike?"

"Exactly alike, Coroner Flint says," the inspector informed him.

"Do you, then, assume the same murderer for all three?"

Lawson's gray eyes were filled with horror, but Phillips gave a groan and covered his face with his hands.

"I beg your pardon, Bob," his cousin said, earnestly. "Please, Inspector, ask only what details you feel to be necessary."

Stimson wasn't quite sure whether Guy despised his cousin for his display of emotion or whether he was honestly sorry for him, but it was clear that he wanted to make it easy for him if he could, and that he regretted his brutal suggestion.

The detective was accustomed to size up people both swiftly and accurately, and he gathered at once that Lawson was far more the man than Phillips, but that Rosebud Rob had a sweetness and gentleness that the other lacked.

But Inspector Wall went on, in his calm, matter-of-fact way:

"We can't go into that yet. We must get the main issues straightened out. You must realize that it is an extraordinary case, and I am going to ask you two men to do your best to conquer your natural grief just now while I put these necessary if heart-

breaking questions. For there is so much to be learned, so much to be done, that we can waste no time. And in the other two cases we are confronted by the terrible necessity of questioning women, which is, of course, an awful ordeal for us as well as for them. So I ask you two strong men to take the brunt of the inquisition and thereby make it a little easier for the women who must come next."

"He's right!" exclaimed Guy, awakening to the situation. "Not a man in the Nichols house! And at Carman's, only Pete, while there are two women there! Inspector, I'll do all I can to ease up on those others."

"Good. Now, my questions are really not too personal. You know of no one who springs to mind as a possible murderer of Antony Dane?"

"I do not," Guy said, positively. "Of course, my uncle knew men with whom he was not entirely friendly. But I can think of no one who would want to take his life! Can you, Bob?"

The gentle tone of this last speech made Stimson more than ever sure that Guy would help the weaker chap all he could.

"No—oh, no!"

"Of course you don't," Guy said. "We'll have to get at it from some other angle, Inspector."

"Yes, I agree. Then, have you, either of you, noticed any change in your uncle of late? In his de-

meanor or temper, you know? As if something was troubling him?"

The answer came in the form of an interruption from Mrs. Hollings, the housekeeper.

"Yes, sir, I can tell you that. It is certain that something had been troubling the master of late."

"Let her speak," Guy advised, as Marley was about to reprove the woman. "I don't live here and she does. If she knows anything, it may help us."

"I don't know anything," Mrs. Hollings went on, in her nervous, staccato way, "except that Mr. Dane was full of worriment."

"Nonsense, Hollings," Bob Phillips put in. "If that were the case I should have noticed it, and I haven't. I think you're imagining things."

"All right," Guy said, "tell us what you've noticed. Even if it is imagination."

"It isn't imagination," said the woman, earnestly. "But I've lived with Mr. Dane for twelve years and I know his ways. And when he crumbles his bread, then it means trouble."

"Go on, explain that," said Wall, not showing the least doubt of her statement.

"That's all. Whenever that blessed man was worried, crumble his bread he always would. And for the last two or three weeks he's been a-crumbling of it something awful! At dinner and lunch time, and also on his breakfast tray. I've seen that tray come

down from his room with a pile of crumbs that would make a pudding!"

"I think this is important," the inspector said, "and I take it to indicate that Mr. Dane was perturbed or troubled about something. A symptom of that sort, known to a faithful servitor, cannot be ignored. Now if you two nephews know of no reason for that perturbation, we must look further for the explanation. We must go through his letters and papers, we must consult his lawyers, and we must find out the truth, hoping it will lead to the identification of the murderer."

"I quite see that," Guy said, "and I'm sure Mr. Phillips will help you. He lives here and knows all Uncle's ways and where his papers are kept and all that. I know nothing about it, but I stand ready to do anything in my power to help along. You are the detective, aren't you, Mr. Stimson?"

"We work together, Inspector Wall and I," returned Stimson; "but we're hardly ready for detective work yet. We have to get the statements and——"

"But you mustn't let the trail get cold," Guy said, earnestly. "I don't want to pretend to detective knowledge; in fact, all I know I've gathered from story books, but I do want to get busy!"

"I don't blame you," the inspector assured him, "and depend upon it, we're not wasting time. Now,

the great point is, were the three murders committed by one man or not?"

Lawson stared at him. "How could they be?" he cried. "How could any one man want to kill those three citizens who, though they were friends, were not associated in business or in any other way?"

"But can you imagine three murderers using similar weapons and at approximately the same time, yet——"

"Did the three men die at the same time?" asked Guy, while his gray eyes seemed to darken with horror, and he added, earnestly, "Remember, I don't know all the details."

"Well, I don't, either," said the inspector. "Let's get Flint in."

The coroner was summoned, and he gave succinct accounts of the other two deaths.

"It's all too unbelievable," Flint declared. "The three daggers are exactly alike, not similar, but identical. I've seen all three and I know. Each man was stabbed in exactly the same spot, between the fourth and fifth ribs on the left side, at the back. Each man was on his own doorstep, apparently in the act of entering his own home. And each death occurred at about the same time."

"Homicidal maniac," Guy said, in a tense whisper. "I know I got that out of a detective story, but I can't see any other explanation. Can you, Inspector?"

"No; yet that doesn't altogether fit the case. Homicidal maniacs are frenzied, excited; I think these murderers were cold-blooded and self-collected."

"You use the plural," Guy commented.

"Because I can't see one man doing it all. Nor can I see three men—— Bah, I can't see any explanation as yet. But we will get it. The matter is too peculiar, too bizarre to go unsolved."

"Shall we get a detective? What say, Bob?"

The inspector stared at him.

"Give us our chance first," he said. "I quite understand, Mr. Lawson, how anxious you are for quick results, but I assure you the spade work must be done first. Give Stimson and myself a few days, then if we get nowhere, call in your Sherlocks."

Guy looked a little embarrassed. "I meant no reflection on your ability," he said, "but I'm a bit impetuous, I fear, and I always strike while the iron is hot. But I'll abide by your directions. Now, look here: What are our orders? I mean, may we go about as we choose? Or are we forbidden to leave the house or what? Understand, I'm not raising objections, I'll obey your rules, whatever they are."

"Well, I won't!" exclaimed Phillips with unexpected vehemence. "Rules, indeed! Are we suspected of the crimes?"

"Hush up, Bobs," said Guy, with a kindly smile. "You'll do as you're told, if only because it's our duty to Uncle Tony to do so."

This was a forceful argument, it seemed, and Phillips quieted down at once.

"Are you two your uncle's heirs?" asked the inspector, rather suddenly.

"Why, I suppose so," Lawson responded. "We never talked that over with Uncle. You see, he was most generous and gave us all the spending money he thought we ought to have. And he was very liberal. But as to his will, I haven't the least idea of its terms. Have you, Bobs?"

"Only in a general way. Uncle always sort of acted as if we were to be his heirs, but he never said anything definite."

"A peculiar situation," said Wall. "That's all you know about it?"

"That's all." The dark look came into Guy's eyes that always, with him, denoted resentment. "We tell you how that matter stands and—we expect you to believe us."

"Oh, yes, of course. Now, as to leaving this place. I see no reason why you shouldn't do so. I'm going myself, now, over to the other two houses. I have to repeat, the matter is so peculiar that we have to make new rules of conduct for each step. I am at a loss myself to know how to manage the affair. I can

only do my best and feel my way along. There will, of course, be an inquest—one or three, Flint?”

“One, I should say.” Coroner Flint drew a long sigh. Like the inspector, he was feeling his way. And he didn’t at all like the feel of it.

“To-morrow?”

“To-morrow or Tuesday. Advise me, Inspector. I am all afloat.”

“I don’t wonder you men are perplexed,” Lawson said, earnestly. “It must be a terrible responsibility to have an unparalleled case. I shall stay here most of the day, anyway. If not here, I’ll be at Mrs. Payne’s.”

“All right,” said the inspector, absent-mindedly.

CHAPTER VIII

THE INSPECTOR GETS VERY BUSY

THE inspector commandeered a car from the Dane-wood garage to take them to the Carman house, and Coroner Flint lingered behind to attend to his own duties.

"We can bring your uncle's body in the house now," he said, looking at the two nephews with a glance of sympathy. This was in contrast to the inspector's curt ways, but Flint's humanity had been softened, not calloused, by the gruesome tasks that beset his path in life.

"Let the men do it," said Bob, nodding to the servants, and with reverent care they carried in the cold form of Antony Dane, and took it up to his own rooms.

"Wall meant to have more of an inquiry, I think," Flint said, thoughtfully, "but, like me, he hardly knows what to fly at first. Three inquiries at once is too much for any inspector or any coroner. I dare say he wants to get a line on the Carman case—and he hasn't started on the Nichols affair—Lord, was there ever such a horror!"

"I suppose the Gilead constabulary is a negligible quantity," said Guy. "I never thought of it before, but there are no policemen to speak of here, are there?"

"Enough for the general run of things," Flint said. "New England villages don't look for spectacular crimes—and I'll bet these Hartford fellows never were up against a case like this before. Wonder how they'll swing it?"

"We must make funeral arrangements, Bobs," Lawson said, looking anxiously at his cousin. "And we must notify the relatives——"

"You do all that, Guy, won't you? I just—can't!" Phillips shook his head in utter helplessness.

"I will, but don't give way like that, Bobs. The more you let yourself go, the harder it will be to pull yourself together. And we've a lot to do. For one thing, I propose to track down the man that killed Uncle Tony, whether he did the other crimes or not. They want me to wait a bit, but I want to get to work as soon as possible."

"What line are you going to take, Mr. Lawson?" asked Flint, a glint of admiration in his eyes as he looked at the young man.

"I don't know. I've got to think it out. Of course, I'm no detective. I don't mean I'm going to do the amateur act, but my uncle was too big a man and too fine a man to let his death become an unsolved

mystery—and you know how likely that is to happen unless——”

“Oh, wait a little, Guy,” Phillips begged him. “Anyway, until we know more of the facts.”

“I’m going to wait, Bobs, but because I have to, not because I want to. I say, Flint, would it be all right for me to go to the other houses? To the Car-mans’, say, or to the Nichols’?”

“Better stay home for the present, Mr. Lawson. I mean here. Do you need to go to your boarding house?”

“Oh, no, there’s no need. But I’m restless. I hate to feel I’m doing nothing. I say, Flint, you’ve seen all three—er—victims, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I have.” The coroner shrugged his shoulders. “And I learned from them not one thing. Three men, all of the same social standing and all of great wealth, all struck down on their own doorsteps, all with identical weapons, and all at practically the same time. No footprints, that I could see, no dropped handkerchiefs or cuff links, no cigarette ashes—where’s your clues?”

“That’s why I want to get busy at once. There may be some clues that you’ve overlooked and that may be lost later. Oh, well, I can’t butt in on the police, but I don’t blame anybody who thinks they’re slow and stupid.”

“Slow, perhaps,” Flint allowed, “but not stupid.

You bet Inspector Wall and Tec Stimson haven't missed a point. If there was anything to see they saw it. Depend on that."

"I'll stay here for the morning," Guy said, finally, turning to his cousin. "We'd better look over some of Uncle Tony's papers and letters."

"Where's his will?" asked the coroner.

"I've no idea," Lawson told him. "Have you, Bobs?"

"Not positively. He always left it at his lawyer's, in New York, but he said he was going to bring it home and look it over."

"When did he say that?" inquired Flint.

"Oh, I don't know. A few weeks ago, maybe."

"Did he bring it home?"

"Can't say. If so, it will be in his desk in the office."

"Where's the office?"

"I mean his office here. A small room back of the library. His business office is in New York."

"Well, if you ask me, I think you two young men better let those papers be till the inspector can go through 'em with you. This is good advice, though you may not think it. I know you're impatient to see the will and all——"

"Not that, Flint," Guy denied. "Get that part of it straight. Uncle Tony had a right to leave his fortune as he chose. I rather expect that he left us two

chaps pretty well fixed. But if not, we're in no hurry to know about it. That will business can take care of itself. But I'd like to go through the desk to see if any letters or papers will throw any light on this horror. If Mrs. Hollings says Uncle was worried and anxious, then he must have been, for she knew his ways well. And can't you understand our impatience to investigate? If Wall were here, I'd be glad of it—oh, well, I'll do just as you say."

"Then I say let things be. If this was an ordinary case, the inspector and the detective and myself—yes, and the sheriff and the village constable—would all be on the job and on the premises. But with three jobs and three premises, we're divided up, and have to be. Can't expect Hartford to send three sets of police complete, and all this in a village about as big as a minute! But recollect, it's murder—foul murder. You don't want to run chances, so as I say you'd better be on the safe side and not go ahead any too strong."

"What about going over to the other houses?" Guy was not insistent, but respectfully inquiring.

"Better not. Just stay here a while and keep patient, and something'll like as not turn up. I'm going to stay here, much as I'd like to tag round with Wall. But he knows I'm here and he hasn't told me to move on. He's at the head of things, and I'm content he should be."

"So am I," Guy came round gracefully. "All right. Flint, you stay here, and Wall will have to come back some time, then I'll have it out with him."

Meantime Inspector Wall and the detective, Stimson, were in the Carman living room, busily engaged in asking questions. They had corralled Peter Carman and Dr. Sherrill, who were both indignant at the questions and short in their answers. Miss Kate Carman was there, too, serene and handsome in a house gown of black georgette; and Peggy, still wearing her white sports suit.

"It seems to me," Wall said, at last, "that we are getting nowhere, and the reason is because of your disinclination to speak out. I assume you are all telling me the truth—why should you not?—yet you tell me nothing. You say as few words as possible, and I can't help getting the impression that you are trying to hold something back. Let me tell you you are making a grave mistake. You must realize that this murdering of three prominent and influential citizens cannot be kept quiet, cannot be hushed up like a small or unimportant crime. It will be probed to the bottom, and if you know facts that you are withholding it will go hard with you later."

"I'm sure I've told you all I know," said Peggy, with a defiant scowl. "You can't expect me to sit

up and make conversation when my father is lying dead in the house."

"No, not that, Miss Carman," said Stimson, in his more placative way. "But we want to get at the situation. Was your father upset or worried over anything?"

"My father was never upset in his life—if you mean visibly upset. If ever anything worried him, rest assured that would be the time when he would appear most gay and at ease."

"And was he gay and at ease at dinner time last evening?"

"Naturally and normally so," returned Peggy. "So, you see, I can't judge of what was in his secret heart."

"He had made no reference to any of his Western friends or acquaintances of late?"

"Oh, he was always referring to them, off and on," Miss Kate answered this. "But he certainly didn't say he expected one of them to come here and kill him and kill two neighbors the same night."

"How do you know that the same man killed all three?" Wall interrupted, suddenly.

"Because my credulity won't stand the strain of thinking three men, armed with three similar weapons, came here at the same time and caused three deaths."

"That sounds dramatic, as you express it, Miss

Carman," the inspector said, "but, remember, three men were killed last night, at about the same time, and with similar weapons. Your credulity, then, is only strained by the idea of three murderers. That, I grant, is an appalling thought, but in some ways it is more easy of belief than the theory of one man running from house to house to perform his deadly deeds."

"Which of the three was killed first, Inspector?" asked Peggy, seeming suddenly more interested.

"It is impossible to determine," Wall said, slowly. "Coroner Flint says it can never be decided from the condition of the bodies. As you know, Dr. Sherrill, the decisions regarding the time of death can be only approximate at best."

"Yes, yes—I know." Dr. Sherrill nodded his red head like an angry turkey cock. "And I can't see that it matters."

"I'm not sure that it does," Stimson agreed. "But it greatly matters to learn whether we are searching for one criminal or three."

"Or two," put in Peter.

"Why two?" said Stimson.

"Why not?" said Pete.

"I think it has to be three," Wall said, decidedly. "Think a moment. Each man was struck down as he was about to open his own front door. No one murderer could compass that condition. But three,

concealed in the shrubbery of the various homes, could wait the moment, and then spring out, stab their man, and go away with no one the wiser."

"True enough," Kate Carman said, her great brown eyes fixed on the inspector, "but you're ignoring the subject of motive. Of course no one man could have a motive to kill all three, but then no three men, a gang, let us say, could have a motive to do away with those three citizens. We know it wasn't robbery, and what else could it be? We can't imagine three homicidal maniacs working in collusion, nor can we see how one homicidal maniac, however willing, could compass those three crimes."

"You're simply saying, Miss Carman," Wall declared, "that the matter presents such insurmountable difficulties as to seem impossible. That is true. Yet it did happen. Some one or more villains killed those men at or near the same moment. Speculation is useless, theories are idle. Therefore, we must depend on getting some sidelights, some evidence or witnesses that will help us approach the truth. We are sure, for one thing, that these men had acquaintances who were more or less inimical. It doesn't need be an avowed enemy. A secret enemy or a traitorous friend is a more plausible thought than a foe in the open."

"Well," Sherrill said, after a moment's silence, "I can tell you John Carman had enemies; one, anyway,

who was out for his scalp. He has been sheriff out in Wyoming, you know, where a sheriff's life is far more exciting than here. Gun play is second nature to a Wyoming bad man, and more than once John Carman had to pronounce sentence and see that it was carried out."

"I'm sure the stories would be of interest, but as you seem to know of one in particular, tell us of that." Inspector Wall's own curt way of talking made him impatient of long rigmaroles told by his witnesses.

"It's no secret," Sherrill went on. "He's often spoken of it before our crowd, but of late he seemed to think the danger was more real."

"Yet, according to his daughter, if he thought that, he wouldn't show it."

"Oh, I know, and Peggy's right, in a general way. John Carman was a strong, silent man, almost always. But when he felt like it, he'd expand and confide with the rest of us."

"Go on, then."

"The chap is George Fox."

"Stop!" cried Peggy, her eyes blazing. "I won't let you denounce that man when Dad isn't here to stand up for him!"

"Why should anyone stand up for him," asked Wall, "if he was a menace to Mr. Carman?"

"But he wasn't," Peggy insisted. "He was a queer man but not a bad one."

"Why do you say 'was'? Is he dead?"

"Oh, no! I said 'was' because I haven't seen him in so long. But he never killed my father."

"I think he did," said Miss Kate, placidly. "John was always expecting him to do so."

"Tell me more about this man," ordered Wall. "Not opinions as to his villainy, but facts as to his personality. Who is he?"

"He's the man who owns the ranch next to ours in Wyoming," Peggy said, speaking in a conciliatory tone now. "He had a disagreement with Dad some years ago, but nothing that he would do murder for."

"You can't tell, Peggy," Peter broke in for the first time. "I know little about this"—he turned to Wall—"because I seldom join the family when they're on the ranch. I hate the life out there. But I've heard Father talk of Fox, and while he made light of it he would sometimes sigh and say 'the game's never out till it's played out,' or something like that. And he had a letter from Fox only a few days ago."

"Did he?" cried Kate. "I didn't know it!"

"Well, he told me. And he said—these were his exact words—'I may come through all right and I may go under. But foxes are devilish sly.' He said no more, and I have been taught not to nag at him. Personally, I am convinced that Dad's death is the work of George Fox, but I can't see how he managed

the other two—or why. You see, if he had killed Dad and someone had witnessed the deed, he would, of course, have killed him, too. But I can't see him killing two witnesses. If they'd all been together—here or anywhere—Fox wouldn't have stopped at doing them all up, but how could he trail round after them——”

“If we knew which one of these three men was killed first?” Wall suddenly exclaimed.

“Heavens! I don't know,” Peter said, as the questioner stared at him.

“Who does know?” Wall went on.

“I doubt if anyone knows,” Dr. Sherrill vouchsafed. “I was called as soon as Mr. Carman was found, and I said, and still think, he died between one and two o'clock. I saw Mr. Nichols' body, and I think he died between one and two. Mr. Dane's body I have not seen, but I'm told he died between one and two. Now there's nothing so difficult as to fix accurately the time of a violent death. So many conditions must be considered. It is within the bounds of possibility that those hours could be stretched half an hour either way, maybe more. And that, you see, makes it practically impossible to predicate which one died first.”

“Yes,” Wall said, “we must predicate that from some other evidence. Now do you know, Dr. Sherrill, that these three men left your home at the inn and

walked round the green to their own homes? Do you know that?"

"I do not. I only know it was their habit sometimes to do so. Sometimes Dane crossed the green to his house, as young Phillips did last night. Sometimes Monty Nichols walked across the green instead of around it. No, I don't know, for certain, just how they went home."

"Then we can't bank on that. You saw Guy Lawson leave them?"

"Oh, yes, he took a taxi. And Bob Phillips walked, ran, rather, across the green. He had an ulcerated tooth and he fairly flew off."

"I think we have their movements accurately timed. But I can't feel yet that the order of their deaths has any bearing on the case. It may. But I can't see how. Now we must learn more of this Fox. I want to look over Mr. Carman's desk, but I can't take time for that now. Have you done so?"

He glanced at the various members of the family, and without a word from them he knew at once that the two women had done so and that Pete hadn't.

"Find anything indicative?" he said, in a casual tone.

Miss Carman sat in stony silence, her pale lips caught between her teeth. But Peggy's carmined lips quivered, and after a moment's pause she said in a scared little voice:

"I found a letter from George Fox—and I burned it."

Wall looked at her so scathingly that tears came to her eyes. These moved the hard-hearted inspector not a jot, as he said:

"Making one more crime. What was in the letter?"

"I won't tell you, if you act like that!" Peggy flared. "You've no right to speak so to me!"

"Your wicked action gives me the right. What was in that letter?"

"He said—he said—'Carman, the time is up. I'm coming for you soon and this time I'll get you.' That's all, except it was signed just 'G. F.'"

"Why did you burn the letter?"

"Because—" Peggy spoke quietly now, and with an added dignity—"because I knew you would think George Fox did it—killed Daddy, I mean. And he didn't."

"Are you in love with this Fox?"

"No, I am not." The lovely head tossed, and the dark, short hair shook itself at him, and so decided was the gesture that Wall felt sure that at any rate the girl was telling the truth.

"Then why shield him?"

"I'm not shielding him, except from injustice. He never killed Father, because if he had, he would have shot him. No stabs in the back for George Fox, let me tell you!"

"That's all very well, but your opinions on the subject, while interesting, are not conclusive. Mr. Fox mentioned no date for his arrival?"

"I told you all that was in the letter."

"I don't see yet why you were so anxious to spare him."

"It is of no interest to me what you see or don't see, Mr. Wall."

"My sister is a stickler for fair play," Pete broke in, "and has always been so. She feared this man Fox would be unjustly accused and so she destroyed the evidence. She meant no real harm."

"She has done real harm. If she does any more she will be dealt with accordingly. Now, Miss Carman, were there any other threatening or otherwise indicative letters in your father's desk?"

"Not any," and now Peggy turned on the astonished inspector one of her very best smiles. And Peggy's best smiles were very pretty indeed.

But Wall wasn't dazzled. He gave her an indifferent glance and turned to a memorandum he took from his pocket.

"Bring in Martha, the maid," he directed.

Peggy's best smile completely disappeared. And strangely enough, the smiles of all present disappeared. It would almost seem that the summoning of Martha struck terror to all concerned.

She looked harmless enough as she entered, her

black uniform and white apron trim and correct; but her eyes darted about the room, and her manner, while respectful, was by no means servile.

"Where is the withered flower you found on the porch this morning?" the inspector asked.

"I—I don't know, sir," said Martha, clearly surprised.

"What did you do with it?"

"Why, I gave it to—to Miss Peggy, sir."

"What did you do with it?" He turned to the girl.

"I threw it to Coroner Flint," she said, with a second best smile.

"Why?"

"So he could catch it. He seemed to want it."

"Please be serious, Miss Carman. Did you recognize that blossom?"

"Recognize? I don't understand."

"Do you know where it came from?"

"Off a rosebush, I suppose."

"Ah, then you do know it was a rosebud?"

"Was it?"

"Yes. And who, among your acquaintances, commonly goes about wearing a rosebud?"

"Oh, why, Bob Phillips. Rosebud Rob, we call him."

"Exactly. And when did he lose that particular rosebud on your veranda?"

"Lordy, I don't know! He's in and out here all the time. He often drops his floral decorations."

Yet Peggy's gayety deceived no one. Her big brown eyes were full of fear, her red lips trembled, and her chiffon handkerchief, pulled by opposite corners, was being drawn into a useless wisp of material.

"Was Mr. Phillips here last evening?" the relentless voice went on.

"No, he was not. He was at Dr. Sherrill's at the poker game. I suppose there are other roses in this town besides the ones that man wears in his coat!"

"Probably there are. Now, Martha, what was your other piece of evidence?"

"That I saw him take a paper from Mr. Carman's pocket," she pointed at Sherrill with the finger of accusation.

"Let's have it, Dr. Sherrill," said the inspector. "I take it you want to do all you can to help along the wheels of justice."

"Sure I do, but I can't give up what I haven't got. The maid is mistaken. She probably saw me use a bit of absorbent gauze or cotton and thought it was a paper. I took no paper from Carman. I didn't know he had a paper in his pocket."

"I saw you, Doctor," Martha repeated. "It wasn't white, it was a lavender color."

"Oh," Sherrill smiled. "Then it was a prescription

paper I dropped from my own pocket and retrieved again. See, my prescription pads are lavender."

The physician pulled a folded paper from his waistcoat pocket, and showed a leaf of his prescription pad.

Wall said no more of this and dismissed the crest-fallen Martha.

"Your clues don't amount to much, do they?" inquired Peter, with a good-natured smile.

"No," said Inspector Wall, with an ill-natured one.

CHAPTER IX

STIMSON CHECKS UP

THE much harassed and perplexed inspector, accompanied by his friend and colleague Stimson, walked round the east end of the green to the Nichols home. There was a shorter cut, across the green, but Wall felt the need of a respite from the strain of asking questions, especially as the answers he had received seemed of no use whatever to his investigation.

Stimson, who had been a quiet but interested listener at the Carman house, now began to chatter.

"Better get after that Fox, don't you think? Sounds promising to me; at least, more promising than any other lead we have."

"As we haven't any other lead, that I know of, I'll agree to that," snapped the inspector. "I've had baffling problems, but this beats them all. A three-ring circus is too many for me. It's like a show of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* I saw once. There were three Elizas and three Simon Legrees——"

"You know, they say," Stimson interrupted, "that the more bizarre and impossible a case seems, the more easy of solution it is."

"Very well, then, go ahead and solve this one. I'm at my wit's end. Granting the Fox man came East and killed his old enemy, Carman, why would he also do in two other respectable citizens, whom he, presumably, was not acquainted with?"

"We may pick up some hints at the Nichols house," Stimson tried to speak hopefully. "You see, Wall, that valet—you said he was a thief—may prove to be the murderer, too."

"And he may have fled by this time! Or cooked up some yarn that will put us on the wrong track. I can do with a proper, decent murder case, but this triplex affair is too many for me."

Passing through the great gates of the Nichols estate, they saw the name "Beaumont" carved on the stone pillars.

"That's encouraging," Stimson observed. "When a man chooses a name that calls attention to himself, and blazons it to the public, there's something wrong with him."

"Think Monty Nichols, as they call him, got murdered for that?" growled Wall, who was in a thoroughly bad temper.

"Not precisely, but it shows he was an arrogant, conceited personality——"

"Oh, come, now, drop that. He was, I'm told, a purse-proud, ostentatious sort, but that type doesn't always get murdered."

"A beautiful place," said Stimson, pausing to look at the landscaped gardens and fine vistas that thrilled his beauty-loving soul.

"You ought to've been a gardener. You're too artistic for a detective," Wall told him.

"Detection is an art, and all arts go hand in hand."

Wall looked at him, for, as he well knew, when Stimson was in this mood he was pleased over something, and it was possible he had found a clue.

Pitts admitted them, but Wall, who was a bit fed up with butlers, brushed the man aside and stalked into the living room, where he heard voices.

Dr. Sherrill was there, having come across the green and so beaten the two who walked around it. Peter Carman was there, and he, too, must have sprinted across. Guy Lawson was there, and told the inspector frankly that he wanted to help unravel the mystery, and could do nothing at Danewood.

But Inspector Wall was sagacious enough to know that these men came because of the luring charm of the young widow, and their anxiety to be of service to her was really second to their desire to bask in her smiles.

Phyllis was half reclining on a chaise-longue, and her wind-blown hair tossed itself against a background of a pale yellow satin pillow.

As he entered the room, the inspector's ill temper dropped from him like a discarded garment. He was

again suave and sympathetic, courteous and even kindly. He advanced to Phyllis with a solicitous air and asked after her well-being.

Always ready to grasp what the moment offered, Phyllis at once sat upright and clasped the inspector's hand in her impetuous way.

"All right now that you're here," she said, with a touching look of simple faith in him, and she made room for him to sit beside her.

She found Wall a foeman worthy of her steel, for he sat down, still holding her hand, and said, in gentle tones:

"I'm glad you're feeling better, for I must ask you some questions."

"No, no," she shook a playful finger at him. "That coroner person, that Mr. Flint, did all that. He asked me everything; there's no more to tell. Are you going to find out who killed my husband? And the other men? Isn't it strange that three of the finest Gilead citizens should be killed the same night? Or doesn't it seem strange to you?"

The lovely eyes sought his, and the lovely face showed a wan, pathetic little smile.

"Yes," Wall answered, gently, "it seems very strange to me. And I'm depending on you for help in solving the mystery."

"Me!" She gave a little musical scream. "Oh, I'm not that sort at all! How could you think so?"

No, no, do your dreadful detective work by yourself; don't drag me into it."

"Very well, I won't," was the soothing reply. "Now answer half a dozen simple little queries, and I'll let you go. Tell me truly and exactly everything you did last evening, after your husband left this house until you went to bed."

This seemed a straightforward and simple enough question, but it surely stirred up the even tenor of Phyllis Nichols's way.

"Preposterous!" she cried, the same being one of her favorite words. "I'll do nothing of the sort! Don't you know that such a question is the same as accusing me of the crime!"

"Oh, now, now, Mrs. Nichols, you mustn't talk like that. You know better, I'm sure. Why, if I suspected you, I'd take a far different way of finding out. No, I ask you, as I mean to ask everybody else present, just what you did and where you were all last evening."

"Oh, well, then, ask some of them first. Ask me later."

"No objections to that, chief," put in Stimson, hastily. "Let's start with Dr. Sherrill."

The red-haired doctor looked a bit surprised, but nodded his head and declared himself ready to make a statement.

So, assisted now and then by Stimson, the doctor

gave a full and plain account of the game at his home the night before and the departure of the men who had played poker with him.

"Exactly who left first?" asked Stimson, and Sherrill answered:

"Young Phillips, you know, the nephew who lives with Antony Dane."

"He went directly home?" continued Stimson.

Sherrill glanced toward Guy Lawson, who said at once:

"Yes, you asked us about this this morning, Mr. Stimson, and my cousin told you about his toothache."

"Yes, yes," said Stimson, who remembered perfectly. "And you left next, Mr. Lawson, I think you said."

"Yes. Dr. Sherrill will check up on me. I took a taxi, stopped at the drug store, and then went to the Small Hours Club, where I stayed until the place closed."

"That's right about the taxi," Sherrill corroborated. "I heard Guy tell the driver to stop at the drug store and then go on to the club."

"All right. That disposes of Mr. Phillips and Mr. Lawson. Now, what I want to get at is the movements of the three older men, the three who were killed. You see, there is a murderer, or murderers, involved. The crime was obviously planned. It was no sudden

or impetuous deed. Therefore, the murderers, doubtless on the watch, were relieved almost at once of possible witnesses—that is, the two younger men. With them out of the way their progress was more easy. As I see it, we have Mr. Phillips gone home, Mr. Lawson off in his taxicab, and the three others leaving your home together. That right, Dr. Sherrill?”

“Yes, I can swear to it all so far.”

“The three friends walked away together?”

“They did. Along the street toward Carman’s. Of course, that’s as far as I can testify. I went back to my rooms and went to bed.”

“Did you win at the poker game, Doctor?”

As always when annoyed, Dr. Sherrill’s red face turned redder, and his red hair seemed to bristle.

“What can that possibly have to do with the matter?” he inquired, belligerently.

“Own up, Doc,” said Guy Lawson, grinning at him. “Frankness is always best. Tell ’em you were the chief loser. It’s nothing against you. You had a rotten run of luck.”

“I sure did.” Sherrill looked rueful. “All right, Mr. Stimson, I ‘gave the party.’ Anything else?”

“Did you pay your shot? I mean then and there?”

“Of course I did. What else?”

Sherrill cast an imploring glance at Guy, which was not lost on the detective. Lawson said nothing,

but Phyllis, tired of keeping still, volunteered an observation.

"Of course he did," she declared. "Didn't you, Lu? Because my husband told me once that men always settle at the time. He told me that because in our bridge club we don't always pay at once. We don't always have the money."

"All right," Stimson ignored the interruption. "Then we've our three men walking off together. Now may it not be that one or more of them stopped before Mr. Carman's house was reached?"

"Have to be at the drug store, then," Lawson said. "Nothing else but that and the post office and the Town Hall between Sherrill's place and Carman's."

"Or they could have met someone."

"Not likely, at that time of night," objected the inspector. "Or is it?"

"No," Sherrill said, for Wall had looked at him questioningly. "No, this village goes to bed early. The young folks do hum around a bit, but after midnight they're off to the clubs or having parties at home. Not much running around the streets. And those men wouldn't stop to hobnob with youngsters. I'd bank on their going home as usual, slowly, but straight ahead."

"Each going to his deathblow," said Wall, solemnly. But if he hoped by his sepulchral tone to bring a gleam of self-consciousness to any face be-

fore him, he was disappointed. Each of his hearers looked serious or sad, but no one looked in the least guilty. Nor did Wall expect it. He had a faint hope that some of them might know something helpful to his investigation, but as criminals they were certainly not suspect.

"We're told," Stimson proceeded, "that in the natural course of their home-going, Mr. Carman would get home first, then Mr. Nichols, and lastly, Mr. Dane."

Lawson nodded acquiescence, but Phyllis said:

"Sometimes my husband walked on as far as Mr. Dane's with him. I know, because he told me so several times."

"Well, my dad didn't," Peter Carman said. "He hated walking around a town. He'd hike miles out on his ranch, but when he was East, he seldom walked at all."

"That seems to imply that Mr. Carman dropped off at his own house, and the other two may have gone on," Stimson said, musingly. "These matters seem of little moment, yet they help us set the picture of the scene. Now, if Mr. Nichols and Mr. Dane came on around the end of the oval and toward their own homes we can't find out whether they separated at this house or at the Dane house. Did no one hear the men come to their door, at either house?"

"Of course not," cried Phyllis, her eyes alight with sudden interest. "If anyone had heard here, any servant, I mean, I should have been told."

"Unless the servant was the criminal or an accessory," corrected Wall, softly.

"I'm sure there was nothing of that sort at Danewood," Lawson put in. "The servants there are all old and trusted people. Whoever killed my uncle was from outside the house, you may depend upon that."

"You don't live there, Mr. Lawson?"

"No; but I'm in and out every day. I know all the staff. I've known them for years, and I can answer for their integrity."

"Doubtless that's all so, as far as you know. But with a big place like Danewood, isn't it true that there are now and then minor changes, say, among the gardeners or garage men, or even the under house-servants?"

Lawson looked a bit crestfallen.

"You may be right," he admitted. "I was thinking mainly of the principal servants. They are above suspicion."

"Yes. Now you see of how little value untrained observation can be. You are ready to vouch for the whole staff of your uncle's help, yet you know only about the principals—butler, housekeeper, and the like."

"That's so," and Guy Lawson smiled frankly. "You're right about trained observation. Guess I haven't the true detective instinct."

"Now, Mr. Carman," the inspector said, "there's that man you know of from the West."

"Fox, yes. That's one reason I came over here. You see, my sister is certain that a Westerner never would use a dagger. She says only foreigners do that. And while that's true, in a way, yet it could be possible that for some reason George Fox chose to stab instead of shoot. And he is sure one bad man. That I know."

"We can't positively say a man accustomed to firearms would not use a dagger," agreed Stimson. "Indeed, he might have done so, for the very reason that it would seem unlike him and so avert suspicion. But can't we find out if this man Fox is East or not? Wouldn't a wire to his home town tell us that?"

"Of course," Pete said, "and I can give you his address. But don't tell Peggy."

"I think you must give us the address without conditions. I'll send that wire at once."

A few moments at the telephone finished up the matter, and Stimson returned to his questioning.

"Did this George Fox know either of the other two men who were killed?" he asked Pete.

"I don't think so, but I've no way of knowing. You see, Father was a close-mouthed chap about his

own affairs. He had friends and enemies both, of whom we, as a family, knew nothing. And though he and Mr. Nichols were not what you could call intimate, yet they were together oftener than you might suppose."

"That's so," and Phyllis sat up with renewed interest. "Twice, lately, I've come home and found Mr. Carman here, shut up with my husband, in most earnest confab. I said once to Monty, 'I didn't know you and John Carman were such friends,' and he laughed and said, 'We're not,' just like that, 'we're not.' So, you see, they had business together at any rate."

"Did Mr. Nichols go over to your house?" asked Stimson of Pete.

"Occasionally. I never thought anything about it, but, looking back, I remember a few times he did. And always they had their visit alone."

"What more do you know of Fox?"

"Almost nothing. I've seen him perhaps half a dozen times in my life. He's a typical ranchman, all for horses and outdoor life. I know nothing against him, except that he is a belligerent sort, a man who has the Indian spirit of never forgiving or forgetting an injury."

"And he holds that Mr. Carman did him an injury?"

"Oh, yes, an old feud over a division line or mis-

taken claims or something like that. Father was a shrewd sort and probably got the better of Fox, with the law entirely on his side. Fox resented it, and with his fierce temper, of course he threatened Father, who only laughed at the idea. Though he did seem stirred up when he got Fox's letter."

"The Fox matter must lay over till we hear from the ranch," said Stimson. "Now get that valet, Eugene, back here."

The man appeared, looking a bit defiant.

But like a bubble the detective pierced his complacency as he said:

"Now, my man, no denials will get you anywhere, except in worse. Just hand over the jewel."

"Wh—what jewel?"

"I advised you against that," Stimson said, more sternly. "But since you ask, the jewel in question is a pendant, about so long and so wide."

The detective indicated with his fingers a proper size for such a trinket, and Eugene, looking a little less cocksure, began once more to babble.

"No words," stormed Stimson. "Just give up the goods."

And so threatening was his tone that the valet reluctantly drew from his pocket a small parcel wrapped in cotton.

Sulkily, he handed it over, but as the detective's frown became more menacing, he said, "I meant no

harm, sir. I was keeping it safe for Madame Nichols."

"Yes, you were! Safe until you could dispose of it! Now, tell me——"

He stopped short as he unwrapped the jewel. Instead of the trinket he expected to see, he beheld a magnificent neck ornament of diamonds and emeralds.

"Yours, Mrs. Nichols?" he asked, turning to the wide-eyed Phyllis.

"Of course," she cried. "Oh, how beautiful!"

"You've seen it before?"

"Never! But my husband told me he would give me one on my birthday. I didn't know it would be such a beauty, though!"

"How come that it's in your possession, Eugene?" Stimson asked.

There was no reply save an incoherent muttering.

"Speak up, man. It will do you no good to hold back. Where did you find it?"

But no reply came. The valet looked obstinate and angry.

"Then I'll tell," said Stimson. "You found it in the lining of Mr. Nichols' hat. In between the sweatband and the felt. You picked up the hat from the rack, and you pretended you took it away to brush it, but you knew this jewel was inside it—didn't you?"

The last words were accompanied by a step for-

ward and a glare of accusation from Stimson's eyes, and the cowardly valet recoiled in terror.

"Y—yes, sir," he whispered.

"How did you know? Speak up, now."

"Mr. Nichols put it there before he went out. He said, if he left it at home Madame might happen on it and he wanted to surprise her."

"So he tucked it in his hatband, and you saw him do it?"

"Yes, sir."

"And when he came home, you lay in wait for him and killed him, that you might steal the jewel!"

"No, sir! Oh, no, sir! I did not!"

"What did you do, then?"

"Nothing. I did not wait up for the master, as he had told me not to. I knew nothing of his death till Pitts discovered it this morning. Then, as I saw the hat on the hall hat tree, I remembered the jewel, and—and I thought it safer to put it away—for the present."

"So you put it in your pocket! Why not give it to Mrs. Nichols?"

"I was going to do that, sir——"

"Bah! Hush up. We'll attend to you later. Mrs. Nichols, there can be no doubt that this is your property. Take it, please."

Nothing loath, Phyllis took the lovely thing and clasped it round her neck.

Stimson looked at her, a little revolted, for it seemed to him that she was thus lightly accepting what was, perhaps, the price of her husband's life. If Eugene had killed Nichols for the sake of this valuable gem, he would probably have used a dagger as being less dangerous for himself than a gun.

But Phyllis quite evidently had no scruples about the associations of her birthday gift, and gazed at the beautiful bauble as it lay against her breast.

Guy Lawson perhaps shared Stimson's feelings, for he held rather aloof, but Pete Carman was loud in his praises and fingered the glittering trinket with the air of a connoisseur.

"It's a marvel, Phyllis!" he told her. "An exquisite design, and perfect stones."

"Let me see it," and Dr. Sherrill joined in the plaudits.

"I want you next, Dr. Sherrill," Stimson said, pleasantly. "You see, we haven't quite straightened out the question of your taking a paper from the pocket of Mr. Carman after he was dead."

"I denied that——"

"Yes, I know, and Eugene also denied taking the pendant, but——"

"What! Do you bracket me with that fellow?"

"You've bracketed yourself if you did take the paper. If not, prove it."

"Why should I take a paper, and from a dead man?"

"Why, indeed? Yet there are many reasons. It may have been an I. O. U.—"

As Stimson said this he was carefully watching Guy Lawson. Lawson had been at the poker party and he was the only one present besides Sherrill who was.

And Stimson's ruse succeeded.

As he mentioned an I. O. U. Lawson's sudden expression of remembrance was unmistakable, and Stimson felt an inward satisfaction that he had hit on the truth.

It was the merest flash of recognition, and in an instant Guy's face was again calm and unexpressive, a veritable poker face, but Stimson had seen.

"Yes," he said, suavely, "I think you paid your card losses with an I. O. U., did you not?"

Sherrill made no answer, and the detective turned to Lawson, saying, "You saw him do this, I suppose. Did he write his figures on one of his prescription blanks? A lavender-tinted paper?"

Guy hesitated. He had no wish to corroborate this charge against Sherrill, yet he saw the futility of denying it. Besides, much as he wished to help the doctor, he didn't propose to lie for him.

Sherrill had done this very thing. He had scribbled an I. O. U. and handed it to Carman, who had

tucked it into his waistcoat pocket. Guy remembered it all perfectly.

"Never mind, Lawson," Dr. Sherrill said, speaking heavily, as one under stress. "I'll own up. I did do that, Mr. Stimson. I did take that paper from Carman's pocket."

"Why didn't you get it when you stabbed him, then?"

"Because I didn't stab him. Indeed, that proves it! Had I done so, I surely would have taken the paper then."

"Not so," Stimson smiled. "That's where you showed real cleverness. You postponed getting the paper till next morning."

CHAPTER X

ENTER KENNETH CARLISLE

IT WAS mid-afternoon when Wall and Stimson and Guy Lawson left Beaumont and walked over to Danewood.

They had, all three, stayed to lunch, at Phyllis's urgent invitation, and as Pete Carman was there, too, and Dr. Sherrill, and as Anne Nichols had kept to her own room the luncheon had been decidedly interesting. Yet nothing definite was learned regarding the tragedies.

Phyllis was quiet and sad of demeanor. Still she was unable to lay aside entirely her luring charm that was so innately a part of her, and though she seemed self-absorbed and uninterested in the general conversation, she looked up alertly when Wall or Stimson spoke, and she favored some of the other men with her smiles. And Phyllis Nichols's smiles were worth having. Brief flashes and quickly gone, they lighted up her eyes and illumined her face with a glow that was half witchery and half angelic loveliness. Her beauty was far from classic, but it was enchanting by reason of its play of expression and its

half-veiled hint of invitation. It was impossible for her not to smile at a man; even an unattractive personality, if masculine, automatically called forth her interest. But few commanded her real attention. For the most part, her smiles were meaningless, or simply the result of her habitual vanity.

To-day, she had looked round her table appraisingly. Dr. Sherrill was in love with her; she knew that. Pete Carman was mad about her; she knew that, too. Guy Lawson she couldn't feel that she had yet entirely subjugated, but he certainly admired her. The policemen—she called them that—received her smiles, because she had more than enough to go round.

That, then, was the state of mind of Phyllis Nichols. She had little grief, really, at the death of her husband, although she had loved him in a childish, grateful way. He was so much older and so much more sedate than herself that, except for her horror at the dreadful manner of his taking off, she was on the whole relieved to be freed of his presence.

And the excitement of the whole occasion appealed to her love of adventure. She was in the limelight, always a pleasure to her nature; she was pitied, sympathized with, and looked upon as a martyr and a sufferer. She would miss Monty, she knew, but there were compensations. She wondered how his fortune would be divided. He had not been very communi-

cative on that subject, but she felt sure that she would receive at least half the estate. Nichols, though fond of his daughter, was not a demonstrative father; and, indeed, Anne did not call forth affection. She and Phyllis had agreed to be friends, but as their tastes differed widely, they went their ways, for the most part separately.

Phyllis Nichols was not hard-hearted; rather, she was heartless, a shallow, self-centered type, whose affections went out to the ones who did the most for her. Wherefore she was fond of her husband, because he gave her everything she wanted. But now his death would doubtless give her even more than she had received from him in life, and her chief feeling was one of elation. This, however, she skillfully concealed, for Phyllis was nobody's fool, and her shrewdness and canniness matched the serpent's fabled wisdom.

This, then, was the woman of whom the three men were thinking as they walked over to Danewood.

They chose a path through the woods as being quicker and more pleasant. This path ran through the edge of a small grove of trees that formed a background for all the houses on the north side of the green. The gardens opened upon it, or in some instances crossed it, but the householders made no objections when people of their own sort used this short cut.

Thus Wall, Stimson, and Guy Lawson reached Danewood at the rear of the great gardens where landscaped vistas showed a marvelously beautiful picture.

Antony Dane had refused to let his estate be shorn of its natural beauty, so a rippling brook, with white-foamed falls, and a deep, rugged ravine held their own against the sunken gardens and the flower borders laid out by the modern gardeners.

The shaded walk up to the terrace that ran along the back of the house brought them to a pleasant nook, where sat Bob Phillips and another man, smoking in apparent content and harmony with their surroundings.

"Come on up," said Phillips, rising, and standing at the top of the steps that led up to the terrace. "I'm glad you've all come. I was thinking of sending for you. Guy, this is Kenneth Carlisle; you've heard me speak of him."

"More than that, I've met him," said Lawson, in his pleasant way, as he extended a hand to the visitor. "Remember? We met at a dance in New York, about four years ago."

"Yes, I remember." Carlisle greeted him cordially. "Glad to see you again."

Bob introduced the two other men, and then, looking a bit dubious, he said:

"I asked Mr. Carlisle to come over here. I tele-

phoned him. He was staying near here. I asked him to come and see what he could do with this case."

Inspector Wall and Detective Stimson stared. There seemed to be nothing to say. They were displeased and offended at Phillips's procedure, but they couldn't very well say so. If he chose to get in a private investigator they had no right to raise any objections.

Lawson spoke for himself.

"Good for you, Bobs. I've been thinking we ought to do something of this sort. No disparagement to you, Inspector, or to Mr. Stimson, but a case like this—yet, I doubt if there ever was a case like this. Have you ever known of one, Mr. Carlisle? Three murders in one night?"

"I never have, but as yet I know little of this case. I've not been here long, and Bob hasn't told me very much. Don't let my arrival bother you, Inspector. It isn't meant as an intrusion. I'll keep in the background. But when Phillips telephoned, I just had to come over and hear about it all, whether I take up the matter or not."

"Of course you'll take it up," Lawson declared. "There's enough to be done to occupy three or four detectives or sets of detectives. One inspector can't take care of three separate and distinct murders, and they all must be taken care of. I think the Carman people expect to call in some help, and as to

the Nichols family, I don't know. You see, there's no man there now, and two women can't do much."

"But the lawyers or business advisers will look after that, won't they?" asked Carlisle, in a matter-of-fact way.

Kenneth Carlisle was above all things a matter-of-fact person. He had been a most successful moving picture actor, but as he himself put it, he was not temperamental enough to enjoy the life. He had displayed sufficient temperament to make a hit on the screen, but he said it was merely an acquired technique and his real self could find expression only in some pursuit that called for a busier brain and a more active and analytic mind.

So he had turned to detective work, and he loved it. He was a private investigator, taking only such cases as promised unusual or seemingly insoluble mysteries. In this case, however, he had come at the invitation of Bob Phillips, who had been his friend for many years. And, hearing the main facts from Phillips, he had resolved to stay on and endeavor to track down the one, two, or three wicked men who had brought about these tragedies.

Though matter-of-fact in manner and in character, Kenneth Carlisle was by no means commonplace in appearance. He was distinguished-looking to start with, and his screen training had so accentuated this that he was a most personable figure. As an actor

he had achieved grace of movement and power of repose that made his every gesture little short of perfection. This was, of course, unconscious on his part, for training had made it second nature. He had, too, an air of self-assurance that showed no taint of swagger but a thorough understanding of his own personality and capability. His face was handsome with the features best-beloved of screen fans, though without make-up it lacked the sheik-like expression so necessary in the films.

As he sat on the terrace, in a long, low wicker chair, he radiated good humor and kindliness, but not a few criminals had wilted beneath the accusing glare of those dark, deep-set eyes. ¶

His soft thick black hair was brushed straight back, and his fine nose and firm chin made his profile almost of a classic type. But his strength of expression lay in his eyes, and to these his other features were subordinate.

And his eyes were not always strictly truthful. His experiences had made it possible for him to assume almost any state of mind, and express the same so sincerely that it passed for a faithful picture of his mental attitude. This peculiar accomplishment often stood him in good stead when working on a case.

For the rest, he was much as any first-class detective, with one notable exception. He detested the word "clues." This was merely his reaction to the

fact that many of his calling insisted on the importance of clues far beyond the real value of their significance. Carlisle was quite willing to accept clues for what they were worth, but he refused to overestimate them. "The use of clues is all right," he would say, "but not the abuse of them." And it was his opinion that few clues could be used, while many could be abused.

His long experience as an actor had given him a suave, plausible manner that might or might not be sincere. If he chose, he could be as simple and honest as anybody, but if it suited his purpose, he could deceive Machiavelli himself. He often advised anyone who desired to be a detective to be an actor first, saying that the training was absolutely necessary.

And so now, whether in good faith or not, Kenneth Carlisle showed a friendly attitude to the police officials and smiled at them so pleasantly that they were almost persuaded he was an inoffensive amateur who would in no way hamper their movements or "steal their thunder." And as to thunder-stealing, that was not one of Carlisle's crimes, while his hampering of other people's movements was their affair, not his.

But this did not show in his face or attitude as he rearranged his long legs in his lounge chair and waited for a lead in the conversation.

"Call Minor Domo, Bobs, and let's have some aids to conversation," suggested Guy, and Phillips reached out and pushed a near-by button.

"See here," began the inspector. "You men don't want us. Now that Mr. Phillips has called in outside help, we'd better go along to the other houses and look into things."

"Wait a bit," Carlisle asked of them. "I've really not had the history of the case, and I'd honestly rather hear it from you officials than from these chaps, who, aside from their sorrow, are not trained observers, and so can't tell an illuminating story."

"That's right," Guy agreed, nodding his head. "Bobs knows very little about it all and I know even less. I wish you detecting fellows would go over it and let me hear all the details. It has all been so like a whirlwind, one murder after another, that, except for a couple of hours at Beaumont just now, I've been in a moil all day long."

"I, too," Phillips said; "that's why I sent for Carlisle. I thought about it all till I nearly went crazy, then I jumped up on the spur of the moment and telephoned. I never dreamed he'd get here so quickly."

The truth of the matter was that the inspector and the police detective were only too glad to do as this kindly guest suggested. They were pretty well at the end of their resources, and, unless some new

evidence turned up, had little to report to the coroner before the inquest. But something might be hinted or dropped by this brilliant amateur, of whom they had heard before; and with a sigh of content Inspector Wall settled back in his chair.

"Very well, Mr. Carlisle, since you put it that way. Perhaps I'd better tell you the main facts."

"Do." Carlisle's quick nod carried the unspoken message that the relation of the facts must be terse and plain.

"Then," Wall began, "we'll start out with the astonishing fact of the three prominent citizens of this town, found this morning, dead on their respective doorsteps."

"Yes." The word was an unmistakable hint to get along with the tale.

"And each of the three was stabbed in the back—in the same part of the back—with a dagger. And all three daggers are exactly alike."

It was Kenneth Carlisle's turn now to delay the recital.

"What?" he cried. "Three similar daggers! I hadn't heard that."

"Well," Phillips defended himself, "I couldn't tell you everything at once. And you wouldn't let me talk about it at the lunch table. And we hadn't much more than got out here when these chaps came along."

"Oh, that's all right." Carlisle smiled at him. "I'm

not jumping on you, but I'm—why, I'm bowled over! Three daggers——”

“And all alike,” repeated Wall, enjoying the sensation he was making for the new detective.

“Go on; tell me of the finding of the bodies.”

“Well, it seems the milkman came along first this morning, about eight o'clock, they say, and he saw Mr. Carman's body on his own doorstep, with the dagger in his back——”

“In his back!” cried Carlisle. “Stabbed in the back! Coward! Skunk! No punishment is bad enough for a man who stabs in the back. And Mr. Carman lay on his own porch?”

“On his very doorstep. He was about to open the door with his latchkey—the keys were found near by—and he had been stabbed just once, and crumpled down in a heap.”

“Go from that to the next victim,” said the listener, his eyes staring from under his heavy brows.

“Well, of course, we don't know the order in which these men were killed, but the next one discovered was Mr. Nichols—that's where we have just come from. He, too, was found—by his butler who opened the front door at about nine, I believe. This victim, too, was stabbed in the back, and lay also in a crumpled heap on his doorstep.”

“Extraordinary! I have never heard such a tale. Go on, please.”

"Then, the last to be discovered was Mr. Dane, of this house."

Wall looked apologetically at the two nephews of Antony Dane, but they were both staring absorbedly at Kenneth Carlisle. Wall rightly gathered that he had better go on with his narrative than pause to apologize for any grief or annoyance he might be causing these two young men.

"And the conditions were the same?" asked Carlisle, in a gentle voice.

"Just the same. Stabbed in the back with a dagger just like the other two. Body fallen in a heap on the very doorstep—outside the screen door, this time."

"Not the other times?"

"At Mr. Carman's the screen door was open, at Mr. Nichols'—I'm not sure I know——"

"There is no screen door at Beaumont," Guy Lawson informed them. "I noticed that when I was there to-day."

"Detective instinct?" said Carlisle, smiling a little.

"Not exactly, but I have a habit of noticing things."

"And a good habit, too. Now, Inspector, you have these three daggers in safe keeping?"

"Oh, yes. But so far, we've learned nothing from them. No finger prints, of course. They don't leave 'em nowadays. Nothing special about the cursed blades except that they're all alike."

"Fancy daggers? Foreign?"

"Not very fancy. Old-looking, sort of antiques, I s'pose. Blades about seven inches or so, hilts dull-looking metal, not carved or chased, yet not quite plain."

"And all alike? That's the most remarkable point of all."

"Does it mean three murderers or not?" demanded Stimson, unable to keep longer in the background.

"Ah, that's the question," said Kenneth Carlisle, seriously. "If we knew that, we'd be a long way toward a solution. But how can we know that? What do you men think, who live here? I mean, you, Rob, and you, Guy. A crime like this cannot be solved entirely by evidence and testimony. It calls for a knowledge of the locality and the conditions and the people. Anybody in the village open to suspicion?"

"I don't know of anybody," Rob Phillips said slowly, while Lawson merely shook his head negatively.

"Don't know of anybody, or don't want to mention anybody?" said Carlisle.

"Well, it isn't pleasant to mention people in connection with a matter of this sort," put in Guy, a little petulantly.

"No, but the whole affair isn't pleasant," Carlisle

reminded him. "You want to learn who killed your uncle, don't you?"

"I do," and Lawson looked vengeful enough now, "but I don't want an innocent person suspected."

"Who is the innocent person you have in mind?" asked Carlisle, quietly.

Guy smiled a little wryly. "Haven't I said I don't want him suspected? To name him would be to hold him up to question."

"All right, I understand. Now is that all about the murders? I don't want to hear how the families were affected or how the community will miss these men. I want only details of the exact finding of the bodies."

"There are clues," began Stimson, diffidently, "but you don't care for those."

"If they are real clues, I do," corrected Carlisle, "but not a dropped handkerchief or broken cuff link."

"Well, these are of that order. One is a rosebud, found under the body of John Carman."

"What!" cried Bob Phillips. "Then I suppose they suspect me!"

"What do you mean?" Carlisle asked him.

"Only that I almost invariably wear a rosebud in my buttonhole. They even call me Rosebud Rob. I don't mind this; it's a harmless fad, I'm sure. But I hadn't heard before that they found one under poor old Carman. Well, well!"

"Planted, probably," said Carlisle, with little show of interest. "Any other so-called clue?"

"One," said Wall, "a queer one. Near Montcalm Nichols' body was picked up an old-fashioned watch key—the kind we used before stem-winders were so universal."

"Odd!" Carlisle evinced a little concern over this. "Know anybody who uses that type of watch now?"

The two policemen shook their heads, but the two young men both showed a certain embarrassment. Lawson looked stubborn and refused to meet the eyes of Kenneth Carlisle, while Phillips seemed in absolute distress.

"Come on, you may as well out with it. This is no time to shield a friend."

"Oh, well," Guy said, after a moment, "you'd find it out, anyway. Dr. Sherrill carries that sort of watch."

"He does!" cried Wall. "Nobody told me that!"

"Nobody has had time to tell much of anything," Guy said, slowly. "I suppose, Carlisle, you'll question all the villagers——"

"All that seems hopeful, of course. Tell me more of the doctor. Is he above suspicion?"

"Oh, yes," Guy said, earnestly. "That's why I hated to tell of his old watch. I was afraid it would set you against him."

"He took his I. O. U. from the pocket of one of

the dead men——” began Stimson, and Lawson growled, “Shut up!”

“Just what sort of man is this doctor?” Carlisle inquired, smoothly.

“The kind that could be a homicidal maniac,” Stimson said, speaking without rancor, but with firm conviction. “He’s a psycho-analyst and a nerve specialist, and a most erratic, peculiar combination of eccentricities.”

“Where’d you get all that, Mr. Stimson?” Guy asked, coldly. “I’ve known him many years and I never found out all that about him.”

“Perhaps you never tried to. But I’m making no accusations; I only say he could be a homicidal maniac, and so he could.”

“So could any of us,” countered Guy.

“No, sir, excuse me. There are some signs that must be present to make such a charge justifiable.”

“Never mind the doctor and his watch key for the moment,” Carlisle said. “How about the servants? The three fine houses in question must have a lot of servants. They must come under consideration.”

“Well, there’s one bad egg down at the Nichols house,” Stimson informed them. “I found him guilty of stealing a diamond pendant from his master—either before death or after.”

“How did you learn of it?”

“In an odd way,” said Stimson, simply. “I found

out that the valet, Eugene, hurried to get his master's hat and clean it soon after the death was discovered. I suspected there was something back of this, and going to the valet's room, when he was not there, I found in the waste basket a bit of tissue paper, that from its shape and creases had clearly been used to wrap a piece of jewelry. I examined the hat, then, and found in the lining inside the sweatband a similar indentation. There was no doubt that some jewel had been carried in that hat for some time—some hours, at least. I taxed the man and he finally confessed to the theft. I don't say this implicates him in the murder, but it must be looked into."

"Good work!" cried Kenneth Carlisle, with a glance of real homage to Stimson, at which that modest young man blushed rosy red. Stimson, though quick-witted, was a beginner, and he was overjoyed at praise from one of Carlisle's reputation.

"We'll work together," Carlisle announced, genially, and Inspector Wall beamed, for Stimson was one of his favorite boys.

"No more suspects?" Carlisle said, looking from one to another. "Do think up some."

"Carman did say, last night at the poker game," Lawson began, clearly unwillingly, "that some enemies were after him. He mentioned no names, but he did seem a bit alarmed. Eh, Bobs?"

"Yes," Phillips agreed, "and also, Mr. Nichols said he could show up at least two who were after his scalp. These may have been jesting remarks, but they didn't sound so. Did they, Guy?"

"No. Still, it's very indefinite. I don't suppose you can gain much from that, Carlisle?"

"Maybe. It's something to know that they even recognized enemies. What about the other man, your uncle? Did he say anything about desperadoes being after him?"

The cousins smiled at one another. "He said he just had his two nephews to fear," said Lawson.

CHAPTER XI

ROB IS ANNOYED

"GUY," said Rob Phillips, after the inspector and Stimson had gone and Kenneth Carlisle had been taken off by Major Domo to select a room for himself during his stay at Danewood, "why the devil did you say that Uncle Tony feared us two chaps?"

"He did say so, didn't he?" demanded Guy, staring at his cousin.

"Yes, but why tell of it? You may draw suspicion on us——"

"Don't talk foolish. Why should we want to bump off Uncle? He did everything in the world for us, and he was a jolly old sort generally."

"I know it, but that speech of his may not be understood as a joke, which of course it was."

"Of course. Well, I'm not afraid. Not for us, that is. But, I say, Bobs, you live here and you know more about the servants than I do. There's no chance, is there——"

"Lord, no. Major Domo engages all the under servants, and you can depend on it he'd never take

in anybody questionable. And of course, Mrs. Hollings looks after the maids. No, no chance of any of the staff doing Uncle in. But who did?"

"It must be that he had an enemy we knew nothing of. Unless there's something in that homicidal maniac business. I'm glad you got Carlisle; he ought to straighten it all out."

"I hope so. And say, old chap, don't you want to move over here? There's loads of room, you can take any suite you want——"

"Not just now, Bobs. Let's settle the estate first. I suppose one of us will have this place."

"I hope I do. I care for it a lot more than you do, Guy."

"Yes, it's too palatial for my simple tastes. Unless I should marry."

"Marry! Good Lord! I never thought of such a thing for you."

"Well, don't worry over it," Guy smiled. "I'm not thinking of it at present. Are you?"

"If I can get the girl I want, yes."

"Peggy Carman?"

"Of course."

"Well, good luck and my blessing. What did Uncle Tony think about it?"

"He didn't want me to marry anybody. You know how he loved his comfort and he loved this home, just as it is, and for some reason he wanted me to

stay here, but not to bring in a wife. Why, he said if he could persuade you to come here to live, he'd be willing I should live elsewhere. But he wanted one of us."

"I know. But I couldn't stand it here. He was exacting, you know, and made demands on one's time."

"I'll say he did! You just had to come here for Saturday-night dinner, but I had to be on the job pretty much all the time. He was an old dear, but he had some trying ways. Still, if you want to come here now——"

"No, not now. I'm mighty comfortable at Mrs. Payne's. I have the whole second floor, you know, and I come and go as I choose, without saying 'boo' to anyone."

"Oh, well, I didn't suppose you'd make a change. but I thought you might like to camp here till after the whole affair is settled. I've put Kenneth up on the third floor; he can take either the north or south suite, as he chooses. You could have the blue suite on the second floor, or—Uncle's own rooms."

"No, thank you. Uncle's rooms are a bower of bliss, but a little too bowery for my tastes. I like a man's rooms, and Uncle's suite would do for a movie queen in Beverly Hills. And for my writing I need quiet and freedom from intrusion, and over here there's something doing all the time."

"Yes, that's about right. Well, then, come and go as you choose. And don't think I'm bagging this house. When the will is read, it may turn out that it's yours."

"Yes, and I may be disinherited entirely. It may be my imagination, but I think Uncle Tony soured on me of late. Did you notice anything of the sort?"

"Nothing like it. Why, last night, he could hardly wait for you to get here. I began to feel jealous."

"Piffle! And don't worry because he said he had his two nephews to fear. If he hadn't been fond of us he wouldn't have joked on such a subject. Now, do you want me any longer, just now?"

"Oh, do stay the day. Carlisle will want to ask a lot of questions, and I get so—so rattled——"

Guy Lawson looked at his cousin searchingly.

"Rattled, boy! Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. The whole business is so awful——"

"Of course it is, Bobs, but don't develop a case of nerves. You've got Carlisle behind you now, and he's a host in himself. Wonder if the others will get in a private detective."

"The Carmans won't. Pete fancies himself as a sleuth and he'll probably try his 'prentice hand on this case. Nothing like starting in at the top."

"He'll probably make a lot of trouble for the real detectives. By the way, that Stimson is nobody's

fool. Perhaps he could have done all Carlisle can do."

"I wanted to consult you before I called in Ken. But I telephoned on an impulse, never dreaming he'd come right over here."

"And just as well he did. Stimson likes him, and Wall, too. There'll be no friction. All right, boy, I'll stay the day here, and later on we'll consider my moving over here to live."

The two cousins sat for a time, awaiting the return of Carlisle, who, however, made no appearance.

At last Phillips rang for the footman, who appeared at once.

"Look here, Minor Domo," said Rob, "did you take Mr. Carlisle to his rooms?"

"Marley took him up, sir, and I also attended."

"And which suite did he choose?"

"The Lafayette rooms, sir, overlooking the green."

"All right. Did he say he'd come down soon?"

"He came down, sir, and went out."

"Went out! Where?"

"He didn't say, sir. I let him out, and he said nothing as to his return."

"Well, by Jove, that's a pretty trick!" Phillips stared at his cousin.

"Vagaries of detectives are often inexplicable," said Guy, smiling at the other's consternation. "You doubtless told him he could come and go as he chose."

"I didn't tell him that; he informed me that he would do so. And he has."

"All right, don't get stuffy over it. He'll come back, I'm sure. I say, I feel at a loose end. Let's do something, Bobs. I mean in the way of settling up matters or something like that. Or could we go through Uncle's desk and maybe find a hint of some way to look for the explanation of all this? Is it up to us to go into his papers, I wonder? We're the natural heirs——"

"Of course. I've been wanting to suggest that very thing. Let's go to it, and if we run across anything better kept quiet, we can slip it out."

"Be careful, we can't compound a felony."

"Oh, you and your law jargon! I don't believe you know what that means."

"I'm not sure I do, only I do know we mustn't tamper with the evidence."

"More jargon! Well, if I see anything that would give Uncle Tony a black eye if it were known, me for stuffing it in the fire!"

But their search through Antony Dane's desk brought to light nothing of a sensational nature nor anything of definite interest. Receipted bills, club notices, some business letters, some friendly letters—these made up the most of the neatly filed contents.

"Drawn blank?" said Kenneth Carlisle, walking in on them, unannounced.

They looked up quickly to see his smiling eyes taking in the tidy, cleared-up desk and their disappointed faces.

"Where've you been?" demanded Phillips.

Instead of answering, Carlisle stood gazing at the beautiful room.

The library at Danewood was a triumph of its master's efforts. Long and wide, with a proportionately high ceiling, the room went from the front to the back of the big house, and windows on three sides gave on to the most picturesque views of gardens, lawns, and the green. Rare Persian rugs were on the floor. The bookcases and walls showed carvings by Grinling Gibbons, which Dane had achieved at great pains and cost. Books were on shelves, some behind steel-barred glass doors, some open to the casual reader. A few fine old pictures graced the walls, and carefully arranged lighting gave the place a soft glow.

The great desk of Antony Dane's was an old English piece, worthy of its setting and appointed with every modern convenience. The cousins sat at opposite sides, and Carlisle, approaching, drew up a chair and sat at the end of the desk.

"What a room!" he exclaimed, softly. "What a peach of a room!"

"Yes, isn't it?" Guy agreed. "We've been going over my uncle's papers—with no marked success."

"I saw that written on your faces as I came in," Carlisle said, carelessly. "I hear mostly with my eyes."

"Deaf?" asked Guy.

"Oh, no. But I get a better understanding from a face than from a voice."

"Yes, I know what you mean. I think I do, too." Guy looked his understanding. "Been for a walk?"

"Been checking up." Carlisle drew a notebook from his pocket.

"On us?" exclaimed Rob, staring.

"Among others, yes." Carlisle laughed at the dismayed face of his host.

"What did you find?" asked Lawson, smiling, too.

"Nothing more than you have told. But I'm a hundred per cent. Missourian. I just had to get outside evidence on you two chaps before I could turn my attention to other people. Don't take it amiss; I have to work that way or not at all."

"I don't take it amiss," Guy declared, "and Bobs won't after he thinks a minute. Just now, he's knocked a little galley-west."

"A little!" cried Phillips. "Why, Ken, I never heard of such a thing! You went out and asked somebody if we were telling the truth?"

"Exactly that. How could I know, otherwise?"

"But—you doubted our veracity——"

"Oh, not quite that! Only I had to have confirma-

tion—corroboration—something besides your word.”

“My Lord! And did you get it?”

“I sure did. I have it from disinterested observers that you two did exactly what you say you did last night. As to other people—I don’t know yet; but as to you two, I do know.”

“And just where did you acquire this priceless information?” Phillips was still annoyed if not actually angry.

“From the hilarious populace.”

“They were all watching our movements, then?” Guy put in, a slight twinkle in his eye at his cousin’s discomfiture.

“Not precisely. But, well, let’s be serious. Bobs, old man, I have to work in my own way, and I assure you I asked no questions that would hurt or embarrass you in any way.”

“Tell us about it,” Guy suggested, serious himself, now.

“Well, I went first to the inn.”

“To see Doc Sherrill?” cried Bob.

“No. I saw the proprietor—rather a good sort, by the way.”

“Old Grimshaw!” exploded Bob. “What did he know about it—about anything?”

“Proprietors always know everything about their own inns. He knew the five men who spent last evening with Dr. Sherrill.”

"Of course he did! Did you doubt that?"

"Stop it, Bobs," said Lawson, a little sternly. "You asked Carlisle to take this case; now you have no right to criticize the way he is handling it. He knows what he's doing."

"I do," Carlisle said, soberly. "I don't know what it will all lead to, but I'm going ahead with my inquiries. And, as I said, first I have to clean off some suspects from my slate so that I can go on with others."

"And are we suspects?" Bob asked, almost in a whisper now.

"Everybody is a suspect until he is cleaned off the slate. So I tackled you two first. I learned from Mr. Grimshaw that the party broke up about midnight; that you, Bob, left first, running across the green to get home on account of your toothache."

"I didn't exactly run; I did hurry, though. And so would you, with a thumping, jumping toothache."

"You bet I would. I learned, too, from your invaluable Minor Domo—delightful name!—that you burst into the house like a wild Indian, flew up to your rooms, and after a session of groaning and moaning you quieted down and presumably went to sleep."

"Well, I'll be damned! Is that the new-fangled way detectives work now? And you don't think it a little—er—intrusive?"

"No. Nothing can be considered intrusive if it's in the cause of justice."

"And am I cleaned off your slate?" Bob looked serious enough now.

"Unless you went out again last night. Did you?"

And then Bob Phillips lost his self-control entirely.

"I won't tell you!" he fairly shouted. "I scorn to tell you. I called you here to find out who killed my uncle, not to accuse me of doing it! I didn't, and Guy didn't, but we don't want you suspecting us and checking up on our stories! I say, Ken, you're going a bit too far."

"You're the one who is going too far, Bobs," Guy said, quietly. "Try not to be childish. For one thing, if you lose your temper so over a little thing like this, we'll be forced to think you did go out again last night."

"Nothing of the sort," growled Bob, but his lips were white and his eyes flashed from one to the other of the two men.

"Let up on Bobs, and tackle me," suggested Lawson, with a quick glance at Carlisle.

"All right, old man. I had better luck with you. The portly proprietor person saw you leave the group next after Rob did. He saw you call a taxi and get in. As you had said, you stopped at the drug store. I went there next, and the dapper young clerk informed me that you stopped there, bought some

cigarettes, and departed again. Also, he testified that you came in a taxi, and it waited for you and carried you on afterward. I corralled the taxi driver, and he corroborated all, and said, further, that he took you next to the Small Hours Club, out Gordon Valley Road. Said you told him to return for you at three o'clock, which he did, and he then brought you home. So, unless you went out again, after returning home, I have you pretty well accounted for."

"And suppose I did go out again?" Guy said, smiling.

"Well, you didn't, for I called at your diggings, and saw your landlady."

"Oh, you did! Well, you're certainly thorough. And what did Mrs. Payne report?"

"That you came in sometime after three, and that you couldn't have gone out again or she would have heard you. Also that you never do go out again after coming home."

"That's right. Why should one? Too late for anything after three o'clock."

"Yes. Now, having you chaps where I want you, I must see some of the others most nearly related to the dead men. Tell me, are they in deepest woe, or, as so many people do, nowadays, are they taking things philosophically?"

"I hardly know how to answer that," Lawson said,

for Carlisle addressed him, Rob being still in the sulks.

“Well, then, what are the relations of those who are left?”

“Mr. Nichols leaves a daughter by his first wife; also a second wife. There are no more in his immediate family. Mr. Carman leaves a daughter, a son—he is an adopted son—also a sister. That is all. Those I have mentioned, with Bobs and myself, make up the list of those left in the three households.”

“Good work, clear and concise. Now there are many servants?”

“Packs of ’em in the three homes. You see, they are the biggest houses in Gilead, the show places, really.”

“Yes, and that fact seems, doesn’t it, to point to some sort of disturbed feeling—socialist or something like that?”

“I’ve thought of that,” Guy said, “for it does seem a reasonable theory. Only there’s never been anything of that sort in the place. A most quiet, well-behaved community——”

“You can’t judge by that,” put in Rob, who was beginning to recover his temper. “I think it’s the only solution.”

“You think nothing of the sort, my friend,” Kenneth Carlisle said to himself; but aloud, he said, in-

sincerely, "Probably that's so, Bob. If somebody was disgruntled over the fact that these three men had everything worth having in the world, they would not let it be known—that is, if they contemplated revenge on the fortunate possessors of wealth."

"But would a person of that sort, granting your bloodthirsty pauper, go for these men at their own homes? A most dangerous proceeding, it seems to me."

"I know it, Guy," Carlisle nodded, "but the method of procedure is so remarkable, anyway, so almost unbelievable, it is scarcely possible to find a criminal to fit it."

"You're predicating one criminal, then? That seems to me impossible."

"To me, too. And don't take my words too literally. I'm floundering in the dark, in a deep bog, and I can see, so far, no glimmer of light. To get the problem before us, let us say, there must have been one, two, or three murderers. You agree?"

Both his listeners nodded and waited.

"One murderer seems miraculous. How could one man go round from house to house, catching his victim on his doorstep, and doing him in with no noise or commotion of any sort?"

"He couldn't!" stated Bob, frowning.

"Then, try two. Now, this would mean collusion, for I, for one, cannot imagine such a coincidence as

two men out to murder with similar weapons at one time, neither aware of the other."

"Out of the question," Guy said, positively.

"And three is the same as two. Only a lunatic detective would deduce three men, independently murdering with the same weapon at the same time. Yet three, in collusion, begins to look like a society of criminals or a death pact of some sort."

"Isn't this mere speculation?" Guy asked. "I'm not criticizing, Kenneth, but it seems to me pure imagination."

"I know it. But where can we get facts to work upon? We don't even know which one was killed first."

"Can't that be determined? That's the sort of definite information I should think necessary."

"Necessary, yes. But unobtainable. All doctors shy at setting the time of death closer than an hour or so. Now, if the doctors agree that these three men were all killed between one and two o'clock, how can we do more than guess which one died first?"

"Can't you reconstruct the crime?" asked Guy, who was getting more and more interested. Bob, on the contrary, was growing restless and fidgety. He began to wish he had never sent for Carlisle. But there was no help for that now, and he tried to listen with some show of interest.

"Reconstruction of a crime is a high-sounding

term," Carlisle said, with a flash of his fine eyes. "And largely a feat of unaided imagination. As such, it is worth little. But if a sufficient foundation can be found, reconstruction becomes of value."

"Even by imagination, how would you build it up?" persisted Guy.

"It's a dangerous but fascinating game," Carlisle admitted, "but I'd start with three murderers. They'd have to be enemies, respectively, of the three victims, of course. They'd have to lay plans to meet these men as they came home from their poker party—meet them on their respective doorsteps. Then, the rest would be easy. But I can't predicate the three killers. Are they a band of robbers? But no robbery was committed that we know of. Are they desperate enemies? Improbable that three fine men should have three terrible enemies willing to form an alliance. As a rule, blackmailers or parties to a feud do not hunt in couples. If it were not so gravely serious in its last analysis, I should say the three murderers and three daggers savors of comic opera. Sort of policemen's chorus. Forgive me if I seem callous; indeed, I'm not. I'm only at my wit's end, and I don't know which way to look."

"How about looking for motive?" Guy offered.

"Good as a suggestion, but barren as a working proposition. Say there was a motive for your uncle's death. Neither of you know of it, or you would have

told me. I have that confidence in you, anyway. You have no idea of a motive for the other two, have you?"

"Only in the most general way," Guy said.

"Mr. Carman said there were some men out in Wyoming who would willingly shoot him," Bob said, seeming eager to put this on record.

"And I've often heard Monty Nichols declare his life wasn't worth a plugged dime if one or two lifers he had sent up should ever escape from prison."

Guy said this slowly and thoughtfully, as if trying to puzzle it out for himself.

"Then," Carlisle said, "there is motive, but we can't bank on it without some indication, some wisp of evidence, however small."

"And where is said evidence to come from?"

"Ay, there's the rub," admitted Carlisle. "But, remember, we've hardly started yet. I've been here but half a day. The crimes happened less than twenty-four hours ago. We can't expect miracles. Now I vote for a ride or a walk or a game of tennis or some fresh-air dodge before dinner time. Let the mystery simmer, let our brains rest, and then, after dinner, we can take it up afresh. When is the inquest, and when the funerals?"

"The inquest will be held to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock, in the Town Hall," Guy said. "I suppose we shall have to go? It will be trying."

"Oh, yes, you'll have to go, and don't let it unnerve you. Just remember you're there to try to get information that will lead to the solution of this mystery. Let us all do that. And the funerals?"

"Not all at the same time," Phillips said, with an evident effort. "I've decided on having Uncle Tony's on Tuesday morning, as I gave the Carmans and Mrs. Nichols first choice of dates. That all right, Guy?"

"Oh, yes. It doesn't matter to me about the date. And I'll stay here, if you want me, Bobs. But I'd rather be in my humble home, and I'm always at your service."

"That's all right. Come over every day. Gibbs, the lawyer, will come to-morrow, and we must see him together."

"Of course. Now, like Kenneth, I'm for some outdoor air. Let's take a long motor ride till dinner time."

CHAPTER XII

I AM GEORGE FOX

As ANNE NICHOLS had said to Phyllis, the inquest held at the Town Hall took on somewhat the nature of a social function. Not that anyone belittled the tragedy or treated it frivolously, but the occasion of a gathering of the village people, both natives and summer residents, carried with it a general air of expectancy and curiosity. And, too, an inquest of three separate and distinct victims of violent death was, of itself, a unique affair. Most of the audience who gathered in the dignified old building had never before been to an inquest of any sort, and their interest rose to fever heat as the proceedings went on.

The front seats were reserved for the relatives of the three dead men, and it was with a slight feeling of disappointment that the onlookers saw the members of the three households walk in calmly and sit down without any outward show of emotion or excitement. Miss Kate Carman, escorted by Peter and followed by Peggy, looked her usual calm, handsome self, and the young people seemed just as unper-

turbed. The two nephews of Antony Dane were inscrutable of expression and of uninteresting demeanor. But the wife and daughter of Montcalm Nichols gave the watchers a small thrill at least. Phyllis, very smart in new mourning attire, which she had managed to achieve somehow in the short time at her disposal, looked her part to perfection. Always beautiful, she showed to-day a soft, pathetic expression which gave the one charm missing from her rather hard little face. Her downcast eyes now and then rolled upward with a look as of prayer. Those who knew Phyllis Nichols best rather discounted the prayerfulness, but her whole countenance seemed illumined with the halo of a martyr. Not so Anne. She was even more self-reliant and defiant in her attitude than ever, and her mourning was simply a black frock which she already possessed. Phyllis sat between Anne and Pete Carman, and her fluttering chiffon handkerchief, with its deep black border, was called into frequent display, if not use.

The coroner's jury, mostly neighbors of the dead men, sat together at one side, and the police officials and reporters were at their respective tables. The attitude of Coroner Flint was one of studied calm. He was well aware of his lack of brilliancy or cleverness, and he had determined to do his duty, but to go no step further. He stated the circumstances that made this inquest necessary, and proceeded to prove,

by witnesses, that the three victims had been killed on their three doorsteps.

As only the few most interested knew these details, save for the garbled stories the gossips had told, there was breathless silence while the witnesses were questioned. Liff Preedik came first, and his somewhat graphic description was cut short by the coroner, who commanded him to tell the bare facts and no more. Loath to lose his brief moment of limelight, Preedik spoke slowly, and at length had given the main story of his finding the body of John Carman. He was promptly dismissed and was followed by Pitts, the butler of the Nichols home. This man was as terse as the other had been diffuse. He gave no information save as answers to questions, and his stolidity and imperturbability more than once brought a slight smile to the face of Phyllis Nichols.

"You had no notion that your master was dead until you found the body at the front door?"

"None."

"You were the first to open that door on Sunday morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"At what time did Mr. Nichols usually return from the Saturday-night poker parties?"

"I do not know."

"You were not required to wait up?"

"No, sir."

It was hard sledding and seemed to get nowhere, so Flint gave it up and called next the butler, Marley, of the Dane household. Major Domo was more interesting than the previous witnesses. He was willing to talk, yet was not too loquacious, and Flint drew a sigh of relief.

"I opened the front door, as always, on Sunday morning," Marley said. "The door, of course, opens inward, but the screen door outside it opens outward. On opening the main door I saw the body of Mr. Dane, sort of huddled against the screen door. Not liking to push against him, I ran through the house and around the lawns to the front porch. There I saw Mr. Dane, and I felt no doubt that he was dead. Indeed, I saw the dagger sticking from his back. I felt very much frightened, and I ran around the house back again and awakened Mr. Phillips. He came downstairs as soon as he could get some clothes on, and then we telephoned for Mr. Lawson to come right over. Mr. Guy came, and then we called for the police. But it was hard to get them, as they were at Mrs. Nichols' then. Of course, we didn't know of the other deaths until the police people arrived. That is all of my story, sir."

Marley stepped back to his place, and Flint acknowledged his action with a nod.

"As we have no means of knowing the order in which these men met their death," the coroner said,

“we shall take them in the order in which the deaths were reported to us. This does not mean that Mr. Carman was killed first, but that his death was first discovered. Miss Carman, will you take the stand?”

This was a treat for the villagers. Butlers were all very well, but for members of the immediate families to talk was far better. Perhaps, they dared hope, Mrs. Nichols might yet be summoned. That would be grand, indeed!

Kate Carman walked majestically to the chair indicated. Though she had spent much of her life on her brother's ranch, it had in no way impaired her sophisticated air nor her aristocratic appearance. John Carman, fine man though he was, had a rugged, informal manner, but Miss Kate was almost queenly in her dignified gentility. She gazed about the room with a detached air, seeming to be in it but not of it. She gave no effect of hard-heartedness, but rather made an appeal for sympathy because of her restraint and evident determination to conceal her deeper feelings.

Everybody knew this brother and sister, knew they were chums and comrades. Knew, too, that Miss Kate Carman was a strong character, almost masculine in her mentality, and the listening crowd felt sure this witness would at least give some hint or suggestion of a way to look for the murderers

Miss Carman told briefly and clearly of her learning of her brother's death.

"Have you any suspicion of anyone who might be responsible for the crime?"

"I have," was the reply, and unheeding the anxiety on Peggy's face and the disapproval of Peter, she continued: "I have reason to think a man out West, George Fox, desired to harm my brother."

"Is he out West now?" asked Flint.

"I do not know."

"I can tell you, then. He is not. Mr. Stimson has had a reply to his telegram of inquiry. Mr. Fox is East at present. Address not known."

"His address must be known," said Miss Carman, quietly. "It is not possible that he would leave his ranch without telling his Eastern address."

"Not probable, anyway," the coroner said. "The matter will be looked into. What was the trouble between Mr. Fox and your brother?"

"A dispute over some property. A quarrel of long standing, and between two high-tempered men."

"Mr. John Carman was, then, a high-tempered man?"

"Very much so," replied his sister, "but he kept his temper under strict control. He might defend himself but would never attack. Yet it would seem he had no chance for defence."

"It would seem so," and Flint gazed at her. "Is

it not true, Miss Carman, that had Mr. Fox desired to end your brother's life, he would have used a gun?"

"It is true that such a supposition is logical and probable, yet who can say what prompted the use of a stabbing weapon?"

"Thank you, Miss Carman; that is all. We are not solving the mystery of the three deaths now; this is merely the question of the cause of death in each case."

"But that you know," said Kate Carman, seemingly surprised that all this legal procedure was necessary to establish a self-evident fact.

"Yes. You are excused."

When Flint was on his dignity, he could be as inscrutable as a sphinx.

Pete was questioned next, and as he was released Peggy was called.

"It wasn't George Fox," she said, not waiting for queries. "He would no more kill my father than I would. I'm glad he is East. Find him and let him speak for himself."

"We will do so," Flint assured her. "Never mind Mr. Fox now. Do you know of anything else that can throw light on your father's death?"

"I do," said Peggy, calmly.

"Will you tell it, please?" Flint's composure quite equalled her own.

"Yes. I saw the murderer walk across the green."

"You did?" Flint showed no excitement; indeed, he attached little importance to the statement, as he thought it was a red herring being drawn by this clever-appearing young woman.

"Yes. I was wandering about my room in the night. I often prowl about the house when I can't sleep——"

"One moment, Miss Carman, I think you have stated that you remained at home Saturday evening because you were overtired from a tennis tournament. Why, then, could you not sleep?"

"That's just it," Peggy said, quickly. "I was so tired I *couldn't* sleep. I got up thinking I might go out on the sleeping porch, but it was too chilly so I gave up that idea. And as I sat by the window a few moments, I saw a man walking rapidly across the green. I think, now, he is the man who had just killed my father."

If Flint had suspected his witness of making up this story, he could hardly have kept up his suspicion in the face of Peggy's frank and honest face. The girl was of a changing sort. Now haughty and reserved, then suddenly melting to a helpless, childlike effect that called forth the sympathy of every man present.

"Did you recognize this man?" asked Flint, and involuntarily his tone softened a little.

"No, I could not see him clearly enough. But he had the air of a man on unlawful business."

"Just what do you mean by that? It is a great deal to gather from the appearance of a man whom you cannot see clearly enough to recognize."

"I could see him clearly enough—but I didn't recognize him. It must have been somebody I do not know. And he had a furtive, skulking air, as of one trying to escape notice."

There were many in the room who believed every word Peggy Carman was saying, but there were not many who knew the details of the case who trusted her veracity. Flint knew that the girl, for some reason of her own, desired to shield the man, Fox—and what easier plan than to make up this story of the escaping murderer?

"You saw no more of this man?" he asked, and as she could do nothing but pronounce a negative, the incident was closed. Of course it was put on record and would be investigated, but Flint was only slightly interested.

And then the widow of Montcalm Nichols was called. Without embarrassment, without apparent self-consciousness, she took the stand and replied to the preliminary questions of statistical import. Then came the query, "Do you know of any enemy your husband had who might hate him enough to kill him?"

For a moment, Phyllis sat mute, her marvelous beauty dawning on the audience as a revelation. Many of them had never seen her before, save as she flitted by in her car, and they fairly feasted their eyes on her. And, secretly aware of this, she let her face grow more and more beautiful, because imbued with animation, then with sorrow, and finally with a glow of righteous wrath.

Kenneth Carlisle, watching her, noted the successive registering of these emotions, and his own screen experience made him wonder if she hadn't been at some time in the films. He understood the perfect poise, the desire to command admiration, and the power of swaying her audience by the evident play of her own innermost feelings.

At last, after two or three almost spoken but restrained words, Phyllis said, thoughtfully:

"Hate may not have been the motive."

Flint stared at her. He was not accustomed to have his witnesses enter into a discussion.

"I will change the question," he said, coldly. "Do you know of anyone who, in your opinion, might wish to kill Mr. Nichols?"

He spoke very slowly, and Phyllis accepted his rebuke and his apology, as they seemed to her, and gave her answer quietly and at once:

"Yes, I know of many who might be glad to know that Montcalm Nichols is no longer living."

“And who are they?”

“I cannot name them. They are men who have done wrong, and who through Mr. Nichols’ legal decisions have been sent to prison or to capital punishment.”

“And you think these men would be inclined to bring about the death of Mr. Nichols?”

“I think, if perhaps they had escaped from prison, or had been set free at the end of their terms, they might, conceivably, have sought revenge. Or it could be that their relatives or pals took up the matter of revenge for them.”

“There is, of course, the possibility,” Flint said. “But you know of no certain person whom you could mention as a suspect?”

“No, I don’t. Mr. Nichols seldom talked to me of business matters. The hints I have heard as to his having made enemies by his decisions did not come from him.”

“I see. Then you can throw no light whatever on the subject of his untimely death?”

“None at all.”

“Have you any reason to think Mr. Nichols feared any such fate as befell him?”

“Not the least. Mr. Nichols never showed or expressed fear of anything. I doubt if he ever felt fear in any way. I have heard his men friends tell him that a district attorney carried his life in his hands,

but Mr. Nichols paid no attention to such remarks. If he prosecuted a criminal and sent him to punishment it was because he felt it was his duty to do so."

Phyllis did not make these assertions as a mere witness. She gave a subtle hint of rendering assistance to the coroner, and she spoke earnestly and with a confiding air that made Flint unconsciously biased in her favor.

He deeply regretted that he had to ask her further questions that he felt sure would trouble her. But it had to be done.

"Mrs. Nichols," he said, "I must ask you for an account of the way you spent Saturday evening while your husband was at Dr. Sherrill's."

A faint flush rose to the beautiful face. Then she smiled, and the effect was dazzling. No longer did she seem the grief-stricken widow, but a charming, even mischievous girl owning up to the truth she had heretofore denied.

"You caught me story-telling, didn't you?" she said, shaking her head as if in self-reproof. "Well, when you asked me that before I did—er—shade the truth a little, because—because——"

"Yes," prompted Flint, "why?"

"Oh, because I wanted to. Well, I'm telling the truth now. I did go out for a little while. I was so lonesome."

"With whom did you go?"

Phyllis gave him a stare of offended dignity.

"I can't see that that has any bearing on the matter," she said, coldly. "I see no reason why I should answer that question. I went with a friend. As my husband was out, I wanted something to occupy my time."

"Where did you go?"

"Just out for a little ride."

"You stopped nowhere?"

"Now, Mr. Coroner," Phyllis said, more decidedly, "you mustn't ask me those questions. It is all beside the subject under discussion. I went out with a friend for a short drive, and it had no connection with the—the death of my husband." She shed a tear or two into the chiffon handkerchief and then once more bravely faced him. "Just because I am alone, now, with no man to stand as my protection, you have no right to bully me and ask irrelevant questions!"

Flint was shocked to be accused of bullying this lovely, fragile creature, and he was relieved when she again granted him a sweet, sad little smile.

Truth to tell, Flint was too susceptible for a perfect coroner, and he felt now that if any bullying was to be done, it would better be directed toward someone else.

But Detective Stimson was of another mind.

He was not ready to spare Mrs. Nichols because of her beauty and pathos, and he declared himself in

on the investigation. He had let Flint alone, so long as he proceeded in line with his own ideas; but now was the time to pin down this butterfly of fashion, and he desired to assist the pinning. And so, much to Phyllis's chagrin and discomfort, she was commanded to tell with whom she went for a drive.

As she still hesitated, her eyes becoming dark and stormy, and her scarlet lips quivering, a deep voice volunteered the information wanted.

"Mrs. Nichols went out with me," said Pete Carman, quietly. "I knew Mr. Nichols was out, and I thought Mrs. Nichols might be bored or lonely, so I telephoned asking her to go for a little run in my car."

"Yes," said Phyllis, with a distinct look of relief. "That's what happened. And we went out for a short ride."

She looked again at her ease and gave a satisfied nod toward Pete.

"Wonder if she's telling the truth now," mused Kenneth Carlisle. "Wonder if she can tell the truth."

Apparently Stimson wondered the same thing, for he proceeded to ask a few questions.

"Where did you drive to?" he inquired, pleasantly enough, but in a tone that demanded an answer.

A swift glance at Carman was responded to by an almost imperceptible nod, and Phyllis said, "We just drove round outside the village, and stopped a few minutes at the Small Hours Club."

"What time were you there?" asked Flint, looking at her sharply.

"Heavens, I don't know. I never have any idea of the time!"

"Do you know, Mr. Carman?"

"Approximately," Pete told him. "We reached the club 'long about midnight, and we had a couple of dances and then went on back. Guess we reached Mrs. Nichols' home about one-thirty."

A hush fell on the awe-struck listeners. Montcalm Nichols was adjudged to have met his death between one and two o'clock.

Stimson went on, calmly:

"Then what did you do, Mr. Carman?"

"I left Mrs. Nichols——"

"Where?"

"On the porch of the side door. She had a key. I went on home."

"Did you meet anyone?"

"On the way home? No."

"And you reached home at what time?"

"Oh, between one-thirty and two."

"You are aware these hours are supposed to be about the time the deaths of three men occurred?"

"I am aware of that."

"You saw no one that could be suspected of being implicated in these murders?"

"I did not."

"Did you see anyone, while you were on your drive, who can corroborate your story?"

Carman showed no annoyance at this question. He thought a moment, and then said:

"We passed several cars, but I don't recollect knowing anyone in them. I may have done so, but it was dark under the trees, and not very light in the open. Oh, yes, I remember we passed Guy Lawson, in a taxicab, as we were coming out of the club grounds. He was just coming in."

Lawson looked up, with sudden interest, and nodded confirmation.

"You were there, Mr. Lawson?" Flint asked.

"Yes, I went there in a taxi, after the poker party. I didn't see Carman's car to recognize it, but there were lots of cars, and I paid little attention to them."

"And what time was this, Mr. Lawson?"

"Let me see. We left the inn about one, I stopped a moment at the drug store for cigarettes and then went straight on to the club. It isn't far; I judge I reached there about one-fifteen or one-twenty."

"Then that's the time you left there," Flint turned back to Carman.

"Yes, it must have been. We drove straight to Mrs. Nichols' house, and then I went home."

"Be careful, please, Mr. Carman, you told me yesterday you got home about three o'clock in the morning. Your servants corroborated this."

"Yes." Pete looked baffled. "Well, I didn't want to tell this part, but I see I'll have to. After leaving Mrs. Nichols, I went back to the club. I wanted to dance some more, but she felt she couldn't stay any later. I did get home about three or so. I stayed till nearly closing time."

"Then, when you returned at three o'clock, did you see your father dead on the doorstep?"

"Of course not!" almost shouted Pete. "I went in at the side door, and went right up to my room. I knew nothing of his death till morning."

"And you have a suspicion that a Mr. Fox is implicated in your father's death?"

"I don't quite say that, but I do say it may be so."

"Do you know where Mr. Fox is at present?"

"No," said Pete, but at that moment a man in the back part of the room arose, and said, quietly, "I am George Fox."

CHAPTER XIII

MORE OF THE INQUEST

IF GEORGE FOX had desired to make a sensation, he must have been highly gratified. As he was, so far, the only person who had been named as a possible suspect, it seemed to savor of bravado for him to walk in on the inquest.

Coroner Flint, though sometimes embarrassed by a woman's wiles, was quite equal to tackling a man.

"You are George Fox?" he asked in tones as level as he would use to the most immaterial witness.

"Yes, I am," and the big, breezy chap smiled as he dropped his huge bulk into the chair Flint indicated.

Somehow, he made a favorable impression. He was tall and strong with the strength that comes from an intensive ranch life. Bronzed by the sun, his face, of course, was rugged and hard-featured, but his darting gray eyes bespoke a deep wisdom and his unconcerned manner told of wide and varied experiences. He was a man who was accustomed to rule, probably even a despot in his own domain. Yet fear-

less. It would seem that nothing could ever inspire fear in that dauntless nature.

He had the easy familiarity of the real Westerner, and he went on, conversationally: "Yes, I'm Fox. I'm owner of the ranch adjoining the ranch of John Carman, out in Wyoming."

"Just where in Wyoming, Mr. Fox?"

"'Bout twenty miles from Cody. One of the finest sites in the whole state. And John Carman's is the next best."

"Were you and Mr. Carman friends?"

"Well, it's this way. We were friends on all subjects but one. I wanted to buy his ranch and he didn't want to sell. I've begged and pleaded and prayed and stormed at him——"

"And threatened?"

"Gosh, yes, threatened every terrible thing I could think of!"

"Including murder?"

Fox's genial attitude changed. His eyes seemed to grow smaller and sharper as he glared at the coroner.

"No," he said, in an icy voice, "no, I never threatened to kill him. I'm not a murderer."

"Then what did you mean by the letter you wrote him a short time ago?"

"What letter? What did it say?" The man was very alert, and waited impatiently for an answer.

"A letter that told Mr. Carman his time was up,

and that you were coming East and that this time you would get him. What did you mean when you said you would 'get' him?"

Fox squirmed a little in his chair. He glanced at the three Carmans, who sat looking at him, but only Peggy gave him a smile. Miss Kate and Peter were grave of face and almost accusing in their expressions.

"Land, I didn't mean anything, except that I should try once again to persuade him to sell, and this time I hoped to succeed."

"Why did you say that his time was up?"

Fox looked a little embarrassed. He seemed suddenly aware that he was being questioned closely, and he resented it.

"Nothing very dreadful," he replied, coldly. "I had promised Carman I wouldn't refer to the matter again for a year, and—the year was up."

"That's all you meant by his time being up?"

"That's all. The desperate meaning you read into my casual letter is all imagination. I came East to see Carman in a friendly manner and strive once again to make him change his mind."

"Why are you so anxious to purchase his ranch?"

"Because it adjoins mine, and the two together would suit me fine. John Carman could have got another ranch that would have been all right for all he wanted of it. He wasn't a ranchman at heart. He just wanted a place out there in the mountains as other

men want the seashore or the lake country. Besides, Mr. Coroner, if I had wanted to do a man in, I'd have shot him, not stabbed him in the back. I'm no dago! You're barking up the wrong tree. Ranchmen don't use daggers!"

"When did you arrive in Gilead, Mr. Fox?"

"Just before I came here. I went to the Carman house and found it under the care of the police. They told me the inquest was on, so I loped right over here. Any more questions?"

"Not for the moment. Perhaps later."

"All right. And I'll tell you another thing. I'm going to get at the bottom of this triple stabbing affray. John Carman was sheriff out our way for some years, and I was with him more or less as deputy. I know a lot about detective work——"

"From reading fiction?" asked Stimson, unable to resist the innuendo.

"Stories? No, sir! From actual contact with bad men—real bad men, of the sort you don't see round here."

"If you can produce a worse bad man than the one who did for three of our best citizens in one night——"

"Land! You don't reckon it was a one-man job, do you?"

"Why not?" asked Flint, who had an idea this new witness had a certain value.

"Only that I don't see how it could have been. Now, here we have——"

"I'm afraid we can't take time now to listen to your opinions or theories, Mr. Fox. If you care to see us later on the subject——"

"I sure do! I'm going to turn detective myself, and I'm going to run down the men that pulled off this affair. Three men did it. A gang, or a committee of some sort. All right, I'll shut up now, and I'll see you later, but I'm on the job."

"Good Lord, another!" thought Carlisle to himself. "Well, Fox seems a good sort—unless he is a very astute criminal, which he may be."

Anne Nichols had not yet been interviewed, nor the two nephews of Antony Dane. Miss Nichols was called first, and like Pitts, the Nicholises' butler, she chose to be short with her answers.

Kenneth Carlisle noted this point, though telling himself it probably meant nothing. Certainly Anne couldn't be suspected of collusion with the butler, but Carlisle imagined that the elderly man might have advised his master's daughter to say as little as possible.

"When did you first learn of your father's death?" asked Flint, speaking gently enough.

"Sunday morning."

"At what time?"

"I don't know."

"Approximately?"

"About nine o'clock."

"How did you hear of it?"

"I heard a commotion downstairs. I rang for my maid and she told me my father had been found dead on the front doorstep."

"You went right downstairs?"

"After I had dressed."

Further questions of this sort brought straightforward but brief replies. The audience gaped at Anne Nichols. Not at all a favorite with the villagers, because of her supercilious air and haughty attitude, more than one nodded knowingly as her terse, almost rude, sentences irritated the coroner. At last he said, plainly, "Have you any idea, Miss Nichols, who could have wished ill to your father sufficiently to bring about his death?"

"I have. His wife did."

"Did what? Killed him?"

"I didn't say that. I answered your question as it was put. Mrs. Nichols wished my father ill sufficiently to bring about his death."

Anne looked like an avenging goddess. Unbeautiful, unattractive as she was, she yet had an air of conviction, an earnestness of speech that could not be ignored, whether believed or not. She sat bolt upright, her unlovely face stern and accusing, her eyes staring at the coroner with an expression of in-

domitable courage and conviction that carried weight to some people who heard her.

"You are sure of these facts?"

"I am. Mrs. Nichols would——"

"We do not want your opinions, Miss Nichols. Please confine yourself to facts. What do you know that leads to your conclusions?"

"The facts are that my father's wife frequently deceived him by word and deed. She accepted attentions from other men and lied about it. She——"

"Stop her!" wailed Phyllis, falling over toward Pete Carman, who sat next her. "I can't stand it! I won't stand it!"

Pete looked a bit embarrassed, but he put an arm round her shoulders, and begged Anne to desist from her unfounded accusations.

"They are not unfounded," Anne blazed back, and Flint said:

"This is not the time for these matters. We are here to determine the cause of the deaths of these three men, not the reasons leading up to those causes."

Phyllis gave him a grateful glance and one of her loveliest and most pathetic little smiles.

Anne was excused and Flint turned his attention to the two nephews of Antony Dane. Rob Phillips was called first, as he lived at the Dane house.

"Begin with Saturday evening," the coroner di-

rected. "You and your uncle and your cousin spent the evening with Dr. Sherrill?"

"Yes."

"At dinner time had your uncle seemed depressed or alarmed in any way?"

"Not in the least. I have seldom seen him in gayer spirits."

"You have no feeling that he apprehended the fate about to overtake him?"

"None. He was genial, cordial, even merry. We three went across the green to the inn more like three schoolboys on a lark than an elderly uncle and two sedate nephews."

"And Mr. Dane had no reason to become ruffled or annoyed during the evening?"

Bob stared. "None at all," he answered, simply.

"And as the party broke up, what did Mr. Dane say, as to the home-going?"

Bob reflected.

"He said to me, 'Run along home, boy, and get your toothache drops. I'll walk around the end of the green with Carman and Nichols. Guy's going on.' And I said, 'That suits me,' and I hurried home, straight across the green."

"Getting home at what time?"

"I didn't look; I thought only of the pain I was suffering. The medicine eased it at once, and I went straight to bed."

"You didn't hear your uncle come home?"

"No, I heard nothing till morning, when a servant wakened me to tell me the news."

"Mr. Phillips, can you call on anyone to corroborate these statements of yours?"

Rob stiffened up as he sat.

"Corroborate?" he said, as if uncertain he had heard aright. "Do you mean you doubt my word?"

"Not at all, sir. But in an important matter, we like someone to vouch for statements made. Did the servants see you come in?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I didn't notice them, if they were about. I am not very patient with physical pain, and when I have a jumping toothache I pay no attention to trifling matters."

"And you can suggest no way to look for evidence of your uncle's murderer?"

"I can't. Our housekeeper thinks my uncle had been distressed or disturbed of late, because of some small mannerisms that she thinks betokened that, but I don't know——"

"We'll question her as to that. Sunday morning, then, you were called downstairs by the news?"

"Yes. I hurried into a dressing gown and came downstairs. When I saw—what Major—what Marley showed me, I made sure first that my uncle had ceased to breathe. Then I telephoned Mr. Lawson, and he came as soon as he could. I told Marley to get the

police, and after a time he located them at the Nichols house. They reached our house shortly after ten."

"That will do. Of course, we know what happened after that. Now, Mr. Lawson."

Guy followed his cousin, and his story of the dinner at Danewood and the general demeanor of his uncle coincided with Phillips's version.

"I think, though," he added, "the remarks of the housekeeper should be heeded. She has kept house for my uncle many years, and in some ways knows him better than we do. If she says Mr. Dane was in some mental trouble or distress, you may depend upon it he was. She is a woman of fine character and devoted to the interests of the family."

"Why did you not live at Danewood, as your cousin did?"

"It suited me better to live by myself," Guy replied. "In my rooms at Mrs. Payne's I am free from interruption and can command my own time. At Danewood I should be more or less a companion for my uncle, and while that would be pleasant enough, I should get little time for my work."

"What is your work?"

Guy's color rose a trifle, but he answered, frankly, "I am trying to become an author."

"Detective stories?"

Lawson smiled. "No, indeed. Not that I scorn them, for I don't, but my ambition is to write essays

—what I'm afraid might be called high-brow stuff."

"I see. And you need quiet and seclusion for your concentration?"

"Yes," said Guy, with a touch of envy for the coroner's command of long words.

"You have any other interests besides your writing?"

"Interests? Well, I like golf and tennis, I'm a bit fond of music and rare books, and occasionally, though not really often, I have a fling at a night club or cabaret."

"You went to a night club on Saturday night?"

"I did. Directly from Dr. Sherrill's poker party."

"Stopping at the drug store?"

"Yes. You can corroborate that by the drug clerk, also by the taxicab chap."

"What is the name of the taximan?"

"I don't know. They have extra ones Saturday nights. But this one is a Swede, I think, looks so, anyhow. He has very light hair and blue eyes and a rosy complexion. You can find him."

"Oh, we have." Flint smiled a little. "He tells of taking you to the club and, later, bringing you home, in good shape but a little gay."

"That's right," Guy nodded. "I don't often go to those places, but when I do I try the whole bag of tricks."

"Who were you with?"

"All the evening?"

"Yes."

"With no chum, or companion of my own, if you mean that. I spent the time dancing or flirting with two or three of the girls who took my fancy. It wasn't a wild night."

"Can you give me the names of the young ladies?"

"One or two of them, yes. But one or two more I'm afraid I danced with, not knowing their names."

"I see. We can take that up some other time. What time did you reach home?"

"I didn't look; I wasn't caring much about the time. But the club closes at three, and my man was waiting for me, and he drove me right home, so it must have been soon after three that I got home."

"You paid him?"

"Oh, Lord, yes. I was quite myself, you know, only a bit hilarious, owing to the festivities of the evening."

"Were you in the main building of the club, or outside in the pavilion?"

"Both. I mean, I danced in both those places. Also we walked out under the trees and sat on the benches there."

"And you were awakened Sunday morning by the telephone message from Danewood?"

"Yes." Guy's face became more serious. "I went

over there at once and found that my uncle had been killed."

"What is your theory of the murder?"

"I haven't exactly a theory, but I can't help feeling that it must be the work of some enemy of my uncle's connected with his earlier life, and of whom my cousin and myself know nothing. It may well be that Antony Dane had secret episodes in his past of which he never spoke to us. I can think of no other really plausible explanation. My uncle was an upright, fair-minded citizen, and had no enemies that I know of."

"Shall you go to Danewood to live now that your uncle is no longer there?"

Guy looked at the coroner a little curiously. He seemed a trifle inclined to resent the personal question, then said, carelessly:

"Oh, I don't think so. I have become attached to my present home. I have plenty of room for my rare books and my literary work, so I shall probably stay there."

"Where do you get your rare books?"

"At various places. At dealers and at auctions and from the catalogues. It occupies a great deal of my time, and I knew were I to live with my uncle and cousin, I couldn't be sure of sufficient leisure to devote to my hobby."

"I see. And you know of nothing that could in any

way throw light on this question of who killed these three men?"

"I do not. Rest assured if I did, I'd tell you mighty quick. It seems to me the most mysterious affair I have ever heard of, in real life or fiction. If any light can be thrown on it by anybody, pray make the most of it. And let me help. I make no pretensions to a detective instinct, but I have a fair and logical mind, and I'll gladly help if I can."

"About these rare books of yours, Mr. Lawson. Didn't your uncle sympathize with your hobby? Did he deem it a needless expense?"

Guy looked a bit amused.

"He didn't demur at the expense; my uncle was a most generous man to his nephews. But his taste and mine in books didn't quite coincide. Mr. Dane liked to buy sets of books in fine bindings, or limited editions of the best workmanship; while I preferred first editions in original covers, whether beautiful or not. But we never quarrelled over these matters. He tried hard to take an interest in my books, and I admired the beauty of his, but we kept our own opinions."

"You collect other things? Art treasures, curios, or anything like that?"

"No. Those things make little appeal to me. I prefer books."

"I see. That is all, Mr. Lawson. Dr. Sherrill next."

The red-headed doctor came forward with an air of importance.

His story of the poker party was the same as the others present had told. Reference being made to his abstracting a paper from Carman's pocket after the man was dead, he admitted it at once.

"Yes," he said, "I acted on impulse. I could ill afford to lose that money, but I had a bad run of luck and I did lose it. Temptation came to me to retrieve my I. O. U. and I yielded to it. I'm sorry, but it was a sudden and irresistible impulse. I will make it good."

"Tell us, Dr. Sherrill, if there was anything said at your place Saturday night to make you think any of these three men apprehended any danger or trouble."

"Not exactly that, but they did talk about people who wanted to kill them."

"They did!" exclaimed Flint, while Guy Lawson and Rob Phillips snapped to attention.

"Well, it was more or less in a joking way. Monty Nichols declared he had sent several bad men to prison for long terms, and he knew when they were released they would be after his scalp. But I've heard him talk like that before and I think it was just a sort of swagger. True, he had brought about the downfall of many a wrongdoer, but I doubt if they would kill him for it. He's too big and influential a

man for a murderer to tackle and get away with it. Then, too, none of those who were sore on Nichols would be apt to have a grudge also against the other two men."

"But it need not be only one murderer we are looking for."

"True enough. In fact, I don't see how it could be one. Yet I can't see three running around the same night——"

"You are not asked to, Dr. Sherrill. We are not solving the mystery just now. We are trying to learn how the men came by their deaths."

"I told that, Sunday morning. There's no question as to method. But what about motive?"

"Confine yourself, please, to the questions asked of you. You said Mr. Nichols told of his possible enemies. Did the other men do so also?"

"They did. It came to be an experience meeting, John Carman said he, as sheriff out in the bad lands, had made some half a 'dozen enemies who would not hesitate to shoot him if they had half a chance."

"He said 'shoot,' did he?"

"He did. But he got stabbed for all that."

"And Mr. Dane? Did he offer any testimony?"

"He laughed but he looked a bit bothered, too. He only said that he'd like to confess to some such gory attackers as the others boasted of, but he only

knew of one or two far-away foes, who couldn't very well get at him. Then he sort of shook it off and laughed and said, 'I've got a couple of nephews to be afraid of, that's all.'"

"And what did his nephews say to that?"

"Oh, they laughed, and we all laughed. Dane was always making us laugh."

"Now, Dr. Sherrill, you know about the health of these three men who died. Did any of them have an illness, a serious illness?"

"Not a bit of it. They were, all three, as hale and hearty as any middle-aged men I know "

"Good-tempered?"

"On the whole, yes. Why?"

"Yet you had a squabble with John Carman just before he left your house."

"Oh, well, just a tiff. Nothing serious about it."

"Dr. Sherrill, you wear an old-fashioned type of watch."

"Yes." The doctor's red face grew even redder.

"Let me see it, please."

A bit reluctantly, Sherrill drew out the big hunting-case timepiece and passed it over.

"Winds with a key, eh?" said Flint. "Isn't that a nuisance?"

"To folks used to stem-winders, probably. But I don't mind it."

"Habit, I suppose. Where's the key?"

"I don't know. I've lost it somewhere. Couldn't find it this morning."

"Did you have it yesterday morning?"

"Yes, of course I did."

"I think not. I think you first missed it yesterday morning—Sunday morning."

Dr. Sherrill shook his head moodily, returned his watch to his pocket, and made no further reference to the key.

Nor did Flint ask any more about it. He put a few more queries as to the routine of departure of Sherrill's guests from the poker party, and then dismissed the doctor.

There was little more, nothing of vital interest, and the jury, without leaving their seats, rendered a verdict against person or persons unknown.

For once it seemed an important matter whether the truth would disclose a person or persons. But no further evidence was forthcoming and the inquest was adjourned for one week. This was a disappointment to the impatient villagers, who were all agog to hear a cross-questioning of the members of the bereaved families. These families themselves, shaken by the proceedings, filed slowly out of the Town Hall and broke up into groups. The Carmans, accompanied by George Fox, went directly home. Lawson escorted the Beaumont ladies, and Kenneth Carlisle and Rob went home together.

CHAPTER XIV

FOX HAS AN ALIBI

BACK again, on the Danewood terrace, Kenneth Carlisle threw himself into a capacious wicker chair and looked moodily at Rob Phillips.

"Bad business, Bob," he said. "I hoped the inquest would give me a steer of some sort, but it was absolutely barren of any suggestion or hint or indication of any way to look. There wasn't a signboard of any sort, and every road to the truth seemed closed."

"What to do?"

"Well, when every road is closed, there's nothing to do, is there, but make a detour?"

"Can you?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's a tough case. No suspect or suspects, no motive or motives, no clue——"

"Thought you didn't care for clues?"

"I don't, not the usual sort—things dropped here and there—but subtle clues, mental clues, those are worth considering, and—there aren't any."

"I would apologize for bringing you over here, Ken, for such an unsatisfactory job, only I know that it's really the sort you love best. I know you're tickled to death to dig and delve into a mystery that

has no possible solution. And I hope to heaven you'll succeed. It's too big a case to go unsolved."

"I know it. And you're right, I do like a hard nut to crack. But I've got to find some crack or crevice that I can pry into. I can't climb a smooth wall. Where's Guy?"

"He went home with the Nichols girls."

"He sweet on either of them?"

"No," Bob laughed. "Who could be sweet on Anne? And as to Phyllis, everybody's sweet on her, of course."

"Why of course?"

"Oh, she's so piquant and enchanting and full of vivacity and charm."

"You among her adorers?"

"No." Phillips shook his head. "I'm so wrapped up in Peggy Carman, I can't see any other woman."

"You know her well?"

"Of course."

"Then, don't you agree with me that she knows more than she's telling?"

"Just what do you mean?"

"I mean, that, so far, the only possible suspect is the man, George Fox. I mean that Miss Carman wants to shield him from suspicion, and to do so she made up that yarn of seeing a man cross the green in the night."

Phillips looked at his friend intently.

"It may be, Ken. I felt, myself, that Peggy's story was a little odd, but, after all, she has implicated no one—I mean she hasn't accused some innocent person."

"No. I wish she had; it would give me something to chew on. You see, the present-day girl has little or no regard for the truth. Peggy is in love with you, isn't she?"

"Yes," was the frank reply.

"Well, then, she has some strong reason to shield Fox, other than affection for him. I mean romantic affection. Also, she is imaginative and quick-witted. Now it means a lot whether her story of the man crossing the green was truth or fiction. Can you find out that?"

"I think so. Shall I go over there now?"

Rob's pleased expression at the idea made Carlisle smile.

"No, wait a little. Now how about Sherrill?"

"I think he's the man," Phillips said, decidedly. "I hesitated to say so until you mentioned him."

"Motive?"

"Money."

"How?"

"Well, all three of the dead men have left a substantial sum to Doc Sherrill in their wills. Doc is hard up, always is. Now say he wants to realize on his prospects, and does all three in at once."

"Motive, method, opportunity," said Carlisle, thoughtfully. "Highly improbable, but what about this case isn't improbable? Then there's Mrs. Nichols. Her stepdaughter openly accuses her."

"Rot. I'm not one of Phyllis Nichols' followers, but I can't believe she killed her husband."

"Of course not, but she may have been instrumental. Who's her favored swain?"

"Pete Carman, I suppose. She seems to like him best of the bunch. But there are lots of others."

"Never mind. If she wanted her husband removed from this scene of action she's smart enough to get it accomplished. That's the way she strikes me. Well, if young Carman is her devoted slave, and if he fell in with her plans, then if Peggy saw somebody crossing the green it might have been her brother—he isn't really her brother, is he?"

"No; John Carman adopted him. I don't know anything about his parentage."

"There we have it. He may come from a line of murderers."

"Are you talking sense, Ken, or foolishness?"

"Dunno. It may turn out a sermon and it may turn out a song. But that would put a suspect in the Carman and the Nichols household. Now we can't leave out Danewood. If I were not the friend of you two boys that I am, I could suspect either of you."

"Lucky you're our friend, then. But you see we both have alibis."

"Guy has, but I don't think much of yours. A toothache is a mighty suspicious excuse, if you ask me."

Though not seeming to, Carlisle was watching Bob sharply. He rather expected the young man would flush with anger, but instead, Bob turned a bit pale.

"I've been thinking that, too," he said, seriously. "Do you suppose anybody doubts that toothache story? Because, you see—it isn't entirely true."

"No, of course not."

"Why of course not?"

"Well, it's such a hackneyed ruse. Like going down to the library for a book after midnight because you can't sleep. Oh, Bobs, don't try to fool me. I never fell for your terrible toothache. Come clean, now."

"Well, it was nothing dreadful," Phillips defended himself. "You see, if Uncle Tony thought I was going to the night club, he'd raise Cain. He didn't mind Guy's going, but he wanted me to be his own little baby boy. So, when I went, and I sometimes did go, I had to go on the sly. So I sprinted home as soon as the poker game was finished, and I went right off to the Small Hours Club. I can scoot out the side door and along the path behind the gardens and get over there in about twenty minutes. And I knew Uncle

wouldn't come to my room or anything like that if I put up the toothache racket. That's all."

"It's a lot." Carlisle looked grave. "Did you see Guy there?"

"Oh, yes. We spoke, and I asked him not to tell I was there and he said he wouldn't."

"Well, there's no crime in all that. When did you come home?"

"About two-thirty or so. Before closing time."

"Motive and opportunity," mused the other. "Seems to me everybody had motive and opportunity. Well, old chap, much depends on the time you reached the night club. Anybody see you enter?"

"No one who could be a witness. I just walked in the grounds, and I saw a girl I know, and I sat with her a while, then we danced, and then I had a few other dances and came home. I'm not crazy about the place, but it was a gala night, and I like the racket now and then. Also, I was sore with Peggy. She had teased me a little too hard, and——"

"And you wanted to get even. Well, Bobs, I'm glad you told me. Of course, you knew nothing about your uncle till morning?"

"Oh, no. I came home by the back way, as I went. You know you can come all the way along by the edge of the woods, and no one is about that time of night."

"And you came in the side door?"

"Yes, I often do. They're all open—I mean unlocked—all night."

"Half Gilead seem to have been running in and out their side doors. Now, son, what about the daggers?"

"Daggers? I don't know."

"Never saw any like them before, did you?"

"Never. But the strange thing is—the three alike."

"No, that isn't the strange thing. The strange thing is that those three should have been used."

"Splitting hairs, aren't you? I don't get you."

"Well, that's what I call a clue."

"What is?"

"The similarity of those three weapons. That's what's going to hang our man."

"One man?"

"Probably one. Possibly two. On no account three."

"All right, have it your own way. I say, Ken, you don't have to tell on me, do you?"

"Not as far as I see now. If necessary, I may have to, but I can't see any real significance in your having gone to the gala business. If you killed your uncle you could have done it before you went—that's why I say a lot depends on the time you were seen there. But don't worry."

Minor Domo appeared then, to announce two callers. They were Detective Stimson and George Fox, and Kenneth Carlisle welcomed them gladly.

"Here's a fine place for a confab," he said, arranging matters to suit himself. "Have a table brought, Bob; I can't be comfortable without one."

So the four gathered round a bridge table, and though Fox and Carlisle were entirely at their ease, Stimson was ruffled. He had learned on the way over that Fox didn't at all agree with his own views, and he feared Carlisle wouldn't, either.

For it was the deep-seated belief of Stimson that Rob Phillips was responsible for his uncle's death, whoever had killed the other two victims. He didn't believe in Rob's toothache story any more than Carlisle had believed in it, and though he didn't know it to be untrue he thought it was. Of course he knew nothing of Rob's trip to the night club, but should he learn that he would be even more convinced of the young man's guilt. And now to have Phillips in the conference was disconcerting. He was debating with himself whether or not to ask Rob to retire, when the matter was adjusted by Carlisle.

"Of course, you can't stay, Bobs," he said, smiling. "This is a private session, and if you'll run away and make a call on your best girl, or something like that, I'll tell you what happened, afterward."

Put that way, there was nothing for Rob to do but to leave them, so he went.

"He won't listen in, will he?" asked Stimson, and Carlisle said, a little curtly, "No, he isn't that sort."

As a reprimand, this was wasted on Stimson, and he settled to the conference with eagerness.

"You see, Mr. Carlisle," he began, "my suspicions point to Mr. Phillips."

"Just why?"

"Well, to begin with, I don't believe in that toothache yarn——"

"Just why not?"

"Well," Stimson floundered a bit, for Kenneth Carlisle was so annoyingly direct with his queries, "it doesn't ring true."

"It isn't against all reason and logic for a man to have a jumping toothache," Kenneth observed.

"No, but for it to happen at that psychological moment——"

"Why was the moment psychological?"

This was a facer, for Stimson had used the expression by way of rhetorical flourish, and could not easily explain it.

"Well," he said, sulkily, "if you want plain statement, I believe the chap pretended a toothache, hurried home, and when his uncle arrived later, he took occasion to do him in."

"And did he do in the other two also?" Kenneth's

tone bore no hint of sarcasm; he seemed honestly asking for information.

"I don't know that," Stimson began, when George Fox decided to take a hand in the controversy.

"Seems to me, Mr. Carlisle," the ranchman began, "we'll have to take the murders one by one. Not necessarily, of course, if you know of a better plan. But if we can get a line on one, let's do so, and pick up the others later. Now as to Mr. Dane—he said, you know, that he feared his two nephews. Maybe a joke, yes; but there's many a true word spoken in jest, as they say. So, let's consider Mr. Phillips as a possibility."

"Fair enough," Carlisle returned. "These two boys are friends of mine, but that doesn't in the least interfere with my honest consideration of their possible guilt. Motive?"

"We ain't considering Mr. Lawson," Stimson put in. "I've checked up his alibi and he was at that hi-falutin club, like he says he was. But Phillips, now, he was here at home, whether he had a toothache or not. He could see his uncle come home, meet him at the front door and finish him off, and nobody in this house would be the wiser."

"Perhaps you didn't hear me," said Carlisle, quietly. "I asked your opinion as to motive."

"Clear enough," declared Stimson. "He gets half his uncle's estate—yes, I've found that out; and,

also, Mr. Dane objected to his marriage with the Carman girl. There's motive enough—more'n lots of murders have, anyway."

"Why did Phillips go outside to do this?"

"Too easy. So's it would be thought to be the work of a tramp or somebody not in the house."

"But there was no robbery."

"Well, cut out the tramp, then, but it made it look like an outside job."

"You agree with this theory, Mr. Fox?" asked Carlisle, suddenly.

"No, sir, I do not. First off, I don't think that young chap is a killer."

"Call that an argument?" said Stimson, scornfully.

"Yes, I do. I can tell a killer when I see one. I come from a section where killings are more or less frequent. And those two nephews of Mr. Dane are not the kind of men who kill in cold blood."

"Meaning they might, on the impulse of the moment?" asked Carlisle.

"Well, to my way o' thinking," pursued Mr. Fox, "any man on this green earth could kill on an impulse—if he had the impulse. I allow there's a sort too white-livered to have the impulse, but any red-blooded man with a brain in his head is capable of killing if given enough provocation."

"Are brains necessary?" asked Kenneth, smiling.

"They sure are! And especially so for a premeditated murder. Now, before we go further, let's settle the question of one or more murderers."

"Can you?" and Kenneth sat up. "Then, for heaven's sake, do. If this affair was deliberate and premeditated, and if it involves more than one criminal, it ought to be easy of solution. But if one man did it all, then I fear we have what the story books call a super-criminal, or a homicidal maniac."

"Which brings me to my suspect," Fox said, a bit importantly. "And, yes, I think we must believe in one killer. The details are uncertain, of course, but those three daggers couldn't belong to three men——"

"Don't say 'couldn't.' They could, you know."

"Most unlikely. Now granting one killer, and granting he is a homicidal maniac, he's smart enough for any deviltry. So I nominate Dr. Sherrill."

Fox looked self-complacent, as if he had put forth an unanswerable proposition; and indeed he had.

"If you're just guessing——" Carlisle began, and Stimson followed with:

"Yes, if it's mere guesswork, my guess is as good as another's."

"Guessing is out of our line," Kenneth told them, seriously. "We can't afford to guess. Now take Sherrill—what would be his motive?"

"Money," Fox said.

"Yes, and the lady," Stimson added. "Say Sherrill

did it—he had motive a-plenty. He wanted money, and all three of those men left him a big legacy. He was family doctor to all of them, and they remembered him handsomely in their wills. Then, he is madly in love with Mrs. Nichols. Everybody seems to be that, but old Redhead is one of the most desperate of her worshipers.”

“Does she respond to these tempestuous suitors?” Kenneth asked.

“Lord, no. Treats ’em like the dust under her feet. If she really cares for any one of ’em, nobody knows which one it is. Well, then, say Doc Sherrill wanted money from all three, and wanted the wife of one of ’em, what price his collecting three daggers and going to it?”

“Unlikely,” said Carlisle; “but, as we’ve agreed, everything connected with this case is unlikely. We’ve got to accept the unlikely to get anywhere at all.”

“There’s no evidence,” complained Fox.

“No,” Kenneth agreed, “and there will be none. Whoever the criminal or criminals may be, there’s fine work been done, and no evidence will be forthcoming. You can bank on that. And the evidence that has been given—at the inquest, I mean—must be taken with several grains of salt. Personally, I am cutting out the servants. It seems to me impossible that the servants could negotiate a big enterprise

of this sort. And, too, had any of the servants wanted to kill their masters, there were far better opportunities than on the front doorstep."

"Right," said Fox. "Good logic."

"Then, eliminating the servants, we have left seven suspects in the families."

"Seven?"

"Certainly. Two nephews here. Two women folks at Beaumont. And three in the family over at the Carman house. Besides these, we have you, Mr. Fox, and Dr. Sherrill, and last, but by no means least, the hurrying man whom Miss Peggy saw, or thinks she saw, from her window late at night."

"You can leave me out, Mr. Carlisle," Fox spoke seriously, "for I have an alibi."

"It is the man who has an alibi that I go for first," Kenneth smiled at him. "Innocent men don't have alibis."

"Yes, I know all that, but you'll find, if you look it up, that I was in Philadelphia Saturday night and Sunday."

"All right, Mr. Fox. Now you know Miss Carman better than I do—what about the vividness of her imagination?"

"Perfectly normal, I'm sure. If she said she saw that man, she did see him. He may or may not have been the murderer, but she saw him."

"I think so, too. Her story carried conviction. Now,

you people who like to use material clues, what about the rosebud found on the Carman porch, near John Carman's dead body? Does that seem to implicate Rob Phillips or not?"

"Yes," cried Stimson, emphatically. "You can't get away from that."

"We can't get away from the fact that it *seems* to implicate him," Kenneth agreed, "but I stand on that 'seems.' I say that the murderer planted that rosebud in order to seem to implicate Phillips."

"I agree," Fox nodded his acquiescence, but Stimson shook his head in stubborn denial.

"Then there's the old-fashioned watch key," Fox went on. "That points directly to Dr. Sherrill."

"Seems to point," corrected Carlisle. "With my skepticism toward these evident clues, I think that, too, was planted."

"Then you're letting Sherrill out," Fox said, in a disappointed tone.

"To me, he never was in," Carlisle said, lightly. "I'm all for the man Miss Carman saw hurrying across the green. If one man committed the three murders, of course he would hurry across the green to get to his next bit of villainy."

"Unless Carman was the last of the three to die. We don't know that."

"That's a point," Kenneth said. "We don't know and we never can know, unless the murderer con-

fesses, which man was killed first. But it doesn't matter. If he had killed John Carman third, and was hurrying away, it doesn't help or hinder our theory."

"Just what is our theory?" growled Stimson. He felt he was not shining in this conference and he was a bit sore in consequence.

"I don't believe our theory is strong enough or clear enough to formulate," Kenneth admitted. "I suggest that we all try to get some further facts or inferences and get together again to-morrow. You see, I hold suspect all the members of the three families. I may be wrong, but until I can narrow it down that is my list. And I propose to narrow it down by proving enough of them innocent to be crossed off, and then—well, then we'll see who's left. And I do not propose to get the stories or assertions of innocence from the individuals themselves. I have to learn their traits, their tendencies, their possibilities from the others. Few can tell the truth about themselves even if they want to. Mark my words, the best way to find out about John Smith is to ask Tom Jones. Will you two come round here to-morrow morning, or let me go to you, and see where we stand then?"

This was agreed to, and the two visitors took their leave.

CHAPTER XV

THAT TERRIBLE TOOTHACHE

IT WAS Wednesday afternoon.

The last of the three tragic funerals had been held, the last of the three wills of the victims had been read, and, so far, no new clue had been forthcoming, no new evidence had been unearthed, and no one was any nearer a conclusion regarding the murders than at first.

The funerals had been largely attended, and the manner of the obsequies in each case showed the character and temper of those in charge.

The burial of Montcalm Nichols had achieved something the effect of a pageant. Never before had the village beheld such splendor of pomp and circumstance. The flowers, the solemn music, the impressive ceremony, the throngs of mourners all lent their glory and glamour to the occasion, an event long to be remembered and described by the village folk.

Antony Dane's journey to his last resting place was marked by a greater simplicity, for neither of his nephews was of an ostentatious sort. Everything was proper, decorous, and in good taste, but there was

no display, and Guy and Rob, as well as Carlisle, were glad when it was over.

The Carman funeral was even simpler still, for Miss Kate wanted it as private as possible, and the services could be attended by invitation only.

The wills, as Carlisle was soon informed, disposed of the great properties about as the wise gossips had foreseen. The Nichols fortune was halved between wife and daughter. The Carman estate was practically divided by three and evenly distributed. The Dane fortune was left half to each nephew. There were many minor bequests and legacies to friends and servants, and due provision had been made for charities.

The details of Antony Dane's will made it clear that his two heirs should choose for themselves as to the houses and other parcels of property.

"I don't care, Bobs," Guy told his cousin. "If you want the country house take it, and if you want the city house take that, too. I would just as lief have their value in money, and Mr. Gibbs will arrange all that."

Lawyer Gibbs was only too willing to arrange and adjudicate and administer the matter, and it was all settled amicably.

"You're outrageously rich," said Carlisle, as he heard the lawyer glibly enumerating large sums and mentioning certain fine securities.

"Yes," said Bob, "but what's money when they think I killed my uncle?"

"Bobs!" Lawson cried. "What nonsense! Who thinks that?"

"Stimson does, and you know it."

"I don't know anything of the sort!" Guy declared, his dark eyes flashing with anger. "How utterly absurd!"

"It is absurd," Lawyer Gibbs agreed. "You're the last man in the world to kill anybody."

"But we want a better refutation than that," Carlisle said; "if Bob is suspected, it's up to us to disarm that suspicion and prove that it is not a true one. I think, Bobs, you'd better make a clean breast of your doings Saturday night."

Lawson looked up quickly, and Gibbs turned an amazed face.

"Aw, no," said Bob, wriggling more like a naughty schoolboy than a murderer. "I don't want to."

"Pshaw," Carlisle laughed at him, "it can't hurt you, and it may do good. The truth is, Bob's tooth-ache wasn't quite so bad as he made it out."

Guy smiled knowingly, and Gibbs looked more and more mystified.

"Come clean, old chap," Lawson advised, and Phillips made a wry face.

"I'll help you," Guy said, good-naturedly. "Let's

say you took a run over to the night club. No great harm in that."

"Did you see me there, Guy? When I first went in?"

"Sure I did, and then I saw you again later, and you asked me not to tell on you, and I agreed not to. And I wouldn't have done so, but Carlisle advises it, and you'll do well, Bobs, to do whatever he says."

"Oh, yes, I s'pose so. I just rather Peggy wouldn't know it, that's all."

"No reason why she should," Carlisle told him, "unless—unless you want to tell her yourself."

"Better do that little thing, old chap," Guy advised. "It may come out and she'd rather hear it from you than someone else."

"Oh, I s'pose so. But I didn't kill Uncle Tony."

"Of course you didn't," Guy said, with an affirmative nod, "and we all know it. But we have to prove it, and how do we set about that, Ken?"

"Only one royal road to that sort of thing."

"And what is it?"

"Just find the real criminal."

Guy pulled a wry face.

"Sounds simple enough, but how do we set about that? I say, Carlisle, it's got to be done somehow. We can't have Bobs going about with a dark cloud

over his young life, and—I'll admit I noticed old Stimson's leanings that way."

"Yeah, so did I. Well, Bobs, don't worry just yet. I'm going out for a saunter by myself. You and Guy finish up your rent rolls and real estate holdings with Mr. Gibbs, and don't quarrel as you pick and choose your houses and lands. Gosh, I don't know what you'll ever do with all those riches!"

"I'll give a good slice to you, if you pull me out of this hole," said Phillips, more despondently than the words seemed to warrant.

Kenneth Carlisle started for his walk, wondering why Bob was so suddenly convinced that he was under suspicion.

"I don't believe old Stimson has anything more on him than he had at first," the detective thought to himself. "What has stirred the boy all up so?"

Carlisle's stroll was by no means of a desultory nature. He went off briskly and made for the dentist's office. The village boasted but one, and as most of the summer people preferred their city practitioner, he found Dr. Mitchell at leisure.

A few words were enough to corroborate the story of the jumping toothache.

"Yes, sir," the dentist stated, "it was a baddish case of ulceration. I treated it a few times and I gave him some drops to relieve it nights. I shall finish up the job soon, now, and he won't feel it any more."

That was all Carlisle wanted, just to be sure that Bob hadn't made up the whole yarn. Apparently he had had the jumping toothache, he had gone home and used the drops, and the medicine had stopped the pain. Then the boy felt like going to the night club for awhile and had done so. But to determine whether he took occasion to kill his uncle as he passed out of the house or in again was a piece of work for Kenneth Carlisle.

He sighed as he thought, "I almost wish I were the sort of sleuth who goes by clues—real, material clues, Not that I have any, but I'd like something to work on. Guess I'll catch that taxi chap again."

He turned his steps to the inn, and soon tracked down the blue-eyed Swede driver and his red taxicab. Not knowing the Swede's temperament, he chose a universal manner of approach.

"Want to earn a nice new little five-dollar bill by telling the truth?"

"Ay ban good man. Always Ay tell truths."

"Oh, I see. Well, run me out to the Small Hours Club."

"No doings now. Better ban wait for night time."

"No, we go right now. Hop to it."

The Swede hopped, and as they drove along in the rattling car Carlisle did a little questioning.

"Sure I remember bringing Mr. Lawson out here Saturday night," the driver told him, seeming a bit

wearied of the subject. "I've told fifty—a hundred people about it."

"Oh, now, now, I guess you mean our cat and another cat. Well, tell me this—what's your name?"

"Svenson—what you s'pose? Olaf Svenson."

"Of course, I should have known. Well, Svenson, was Mr. Lawson in gay good humor going out?"

"Not so gay. He come home gay."

"I don't mean that. I mean was he happy and pleasant going out, or quiet?"

"Ay don't know, Ay not bother about him. But, say, no, he don't holler much to the other cars."

"And he did coming home?"

"Oh, well, that was different—he was—you know, lit."

"Not much?"

"No, not much."

"He brought a lady with him?"

"No, no ladies in my car. But ladies at the club place."

"Yes, of course. What ladies? Their names?"

"How I know? I go and come—back and fro."

"Yes, I see. Well, take me there, anyhow."

At the night club Kenneth found no one of any interest. Half a dozen cleaning women were busy, and some waiters were already preparing tables for the evening. Kenneth quickly picked the most intelligent-looking one and took a seat at a table.

"Nothing much," he said, "just a snack of any sort."

And over the snack he managed to engage the waiter's attention.

"Tell me," he began, "if that Lawson devil had my girl here last Saturday night?"

"Who's your girl?" the waiter demanded, surprised into interest by the seemingly angry man.

"All blonde!—curls—blue eyes—pinky cheeks—ah, you know!"

"Pinky cheeks, that would be Miss Mooney——"

"Yes, was she with Lawson?"

"She was with everybody. She's one of the hostesses."

"Was she with young Phillips?" Carlisle at last got out what he wanted to know.

"No, not Mr. Phillips. He had eyes only for Miss Lee. Miss Lotta Lee."

"Don't know her. Where does she live?"

"In the village. On Pearl Street."

"And she is Mr. Phillips' favorite?"

"All of that, sir. He danced with nobody else."

"What time did these men leave here?"

"Donno, sir. Can't keep track of the young men like that. And, too, they're in and out of the house here, now in the pavilions, now out among the trees—who could know anything about them?"

"Oh, of course, that's so. I say, where does Miss Mooney live?"

"On Pearl Street, too. Most of the young ladies live around there."

"Well, listen here. Was Mr. Carman here? Mr. Peter Carman?"

"On Saturday night?"

"Yeah."

"Well, he was here a short time. Came late and went early, as you might say."

"A lady with him?"

"I'll say so! The most beautiful lady I ever saw in my life."

Of course, Phyllis was all of that.

"I see. Now, did these people all chum together?"

"Oh, no, sir. You see, Mr. Carman had his lady with him, but Mr. Phillips and Mr. Lawson, they just picked up girls around here. They were just out for a little lark. No harm at all."

"No, of course not."

"You—er—you don't think that nice young Phillips did in his uncle, do you, sir?"

"Do you? Does anybody?"

"Well, yes, most everybody does."

"No, I don't think so. And why pick on him more'n Mr. Carman or Mr. Lawson? They're all in the same boat."

"Oh, no. Mr. Lawson, he only comes here once in a long while. But he's quiet and wise. And Mr. Carman, he's never been here but two or three times in all.

But young Bob Phillips, he's a high one. He spends money like water, and he never has enough."

"Oh, well, these high steppers are often the best chaps after all. No, those boys aren't murderers, any of them. Forget it. Don't make those suggestions to anybody else, will you?"

The request was supplemented by a potent argument, which the waiter quickly pocketed with a promise of silence to the death.

Carlisle hunted up his blue-eyed Swede again and demanded transportation to Pearl Street. Once there, he dismissed the driver, for the street was not very far from Danewood. He easily found the house where Miss Mooney and Miss Lee lived, and had no trouble at all in being received by these ladies.

He pursued his policy of seeming to ask about Guy, but also learning bits of information about Bob.

Miss Mooney was enthusiastic about Guy.

"Not one of the noisy kind," she informed Kenneth, "but a real high-up gentleman."

"A fine dancer?"

"Yes, good enough, not like a pro, you know, but nice and easy. And a good spender, and gee whiz, a good looker."

"If you care for just black and white," put in Miss Lee. "That Lawson man is all black and white, except for his gold tooth, and that seemed to bother him—loose or something."

"It's in the family," laughed Carlisle. "Phillips, his cousin, had toothache, too."

"He didn't say anything about it to me," said Miss Lee, giggling. "Guess it wasn't very bad."

"Well, maybe not. Were both men there all the evening?"

"Mr. Lawson was," Maisie Mooney said. "But he wasn't with me all the time. I saw him here and there flirting round with the girls."

"Weren't you jealous?"

"Oh, no, there are others."

"Of course. And Mr. Phillips went home early?"

"Not so awful early, but earlier than Mr. Lawson. He stayed until he was invited to go."

"Not——?"

"Oh, no. He was just jolly and gay. Oh, he's a real nice sort."

"Was Mr. Phillips any the worse for wear?"

"Not exactly. You see, it was a gala night, and we all celebrated more or less. You coming over to-night?"

"Want me?" and Kenneth gave a wicked wink.

"You bet," they chorused, but without promising anything he took his leave and started on his walk home to Danewood.

"Lord," he exclaimed to himself, "how can those chaps stand those girls! I'm no paragon of righteousness, but they don't suit my taste."

But as he neared home he felt he wanted a longer walk, and went on round the green. This brought him to the Carman house, and, seeing Peggy in the garden, he went in.

"Oh, you're the detective," she said, looking at him in positive fright.

"Yes, but I won't eat you," he smiled back. "Really, Miss Carman, detectives are among the safest people in the world to trust."

"Come in, then," she said. "Do you want to see me or Aunt Kate?"

"You. And don't take my call seriously. I'm not interviewing you or trying to trip you up."

"I always think detectives are trying to find out something. What do you want, then?"

But Carlisle's disarming smile made her feel a little ashamed of herself, and she called a man who was cutting flowers for the house, and asked him to have tea sent out and to request Miss Carman to come.

"You can have me alone first, and then tea and Aunt Kate," she said, recovering entirely her poise and good nature.

"Then I will ask you a question while we are alone."

"I told you so," she countered, but she smiled.

"Tell me more about the man you saw late at night."

"Oh, I can't. I don't know anything more than I told."

"Then you know his identity."

"No, no, I don't. I've no idea who he was."

"Yes, you have an idea, but you hope to heaven your idea is wrong."

She stared at him.

"You're right," she said, slowly. "I thought—I feared it might be Pete, but I am sure it wasn't."

"I see. I don't wonder you hope you are wrong, and you were for—— What time was it?"

"I don't know exactly. I had no way of knowing. It was dark and I didn't switch on a light."

"Never mind the time, then. You're sure now, aren't you, that it wasn't your brother?"

"Oh, yes. I don't believe I ever really thought it was."

"Well, then, what is it that's on your mind? You're terribly undecided whether to confide in me or not. I don't ask you to, but I do say it would be wise to do so."

"Oh, I wish I dared!"

"Is it——" he leaned nearer—"is it about Rob Phillips?"

Peggy's face went white, and Kenneth knew he had hit on the truth. He saw, as in a flash, that she hadn't feared the man she saw was her brother, but that it was Phillips.

"Cheer up," he said, kindly. "There's not a shred of evidence against Bob."

"But Mr. Stimson thinks there is," she whispered.

"He doesn't know everything in the world. Don't you get stirred up over what Stimson thinks, until he has some proof to back it up."

"Oh, you are a comfort. I didn't know a detective could be so nice. Do you really believe Bob is innocent?"

Her naïve question showed that she must have a trace of doubt herself, whereupon Carlisle felt surer than ever that the man she saw crossing the green must have frightened her badly.

Miss Kate arrived then, also the tea wagon, and next appeared George Fox.

He greeted Carlisle as boisterously as Miss Kate was dignified.

"Well, man," Fox said, "no solution yet to our little problem?"

"I can't call it a little problem," Kenneth told him. "One of the biggest I have ever tackled. Are you working on it?"

"Me? No. Got it all solved." Fox waved his arms as if brushing away all doubts or uncertainties.

"And your answer? Or is it a secret?"

"Not from you," Fox put on a serious air. "But I mean it. I've solved it to my own satisfaction. It was Sherrill, of course. Who else had a strong motive

for killing all three men? Each of them left the doctor fifty thousand dollars. Doc Sherrill is deeply in debt, and faced bankruptcy courts. Then, who else is capable of those deft strokes, just where they would carry instant death at a single quick blow? And opportunity! Sherrill, I'm told, had a way of roaming the streets at night. He could stroll up and down the green, and nobody would notice him at all. And a doctor is cold-blooded. He could stab those friends of his—friends, mind you—with no more feeling than he would show at the operating table. And the weapons. A doctor can acquire any kind of cutting instruments in the course of his career. Your layman, your gentleman or ordinary villager could never accumulate three sharp daggers. Where would he get them, I'd like to know?"

"Well, you have made out a case." Carlisle spoke admiringly, though his voice expressed appreciation of Fox's cleverness rather than agreement with it.

"You don't subscribe?" said Fox, sensing this.

"I don't say that," Kenneth replied. "I'm interested, very much so. I say, Miss Kate, let me help you."

Kate Carman had found herself unable to pour the tea properly, and Peggy, with a quick look at her aunt, changed places with her. The girl did it easily and gracefully, but Carlisle was sure something Fox had said had perturbed Miss Kate. The incident

passed over, and all resumed their teacups as Fox took up his tale again.

But this time Miss Kate, making a graceful excuse, left them and went into the house.

"She always gets stirred up if we suggest it might have been Dr. Sherrill," Peggy said. "I wonder why."

"Lots of reasons, kiddy," George Fox said. "But I say, Carlisle, where's the flaw in my theory?"

"Only that it is only a theory," returned Kenneth. "You've no evidence to back it up."

"What about the old-fashioned watch key?"

"That's a clue." Ken's eyes twinkled. "You know what I think of clues?"

"Don't you believe in them?" asked Peggy, eagerly, a note in her voice like that of one who doubts a belief in fairies.

"Oh, sometimes. But they're so easily planted. Take this one, now. Doesn't it seem to you incredible that an old-fashioned watch key should drop from Dr. Sherrill's pocket at the very time and place it could incriminate him?"

"But it did drop there."

"It was found there, yes. But I hold that it was planted—placed there by the murderer to make it appear to be Dr. Sherrill."

"Do you never believe in clues?" Fox looked his incredulity.

"Seldom in dropped ones. Like that rosebud on your porch here. I don't believe Rob Phillips dropped that as he was committing an act of murder. Yet that is more likely than the watch key, for Rob always had a rosebud on."

"And Dr. Sherrill always carries his watch key," cried Peggy, quick to catch this point.

"But the flower could drop more easily and naturally than the key," Kenneth said, gently. "I don't want to hurt you, Miss Carman, but we are talking of the plausibility of dropped clues, and I say the rosebud is an improbable one but the watch key is an impossible one."

"I can't agree to that," Fox persisted. "Of course, I see what you mean, and I admit the coincidence. But crimes have always been solved by the clues dropped or left behind by the criminals, and always will be."

"Maybe," said Carlisle.

CHAPTER XVI

CARLISLE DOES SOME DEEP THINKING

KENNETH CARLISLE was thinking. More than that, he was reasoning. More than that, he was endeavoring to use only right reasoning. Carlisle knew the meaning of the word "ratiocination." He even knew how to pronounce it, and that's more than most people know. But he didn't use the word often. He preferred reasoning—plain, sound right reasoning. Yet it was hard to achieve.

There was a delightful balcony out from his bedroom that overlooked the gardens and the falls, and here, in the early morning, Carlisle sat to think. His career as a film star had not left him with any effete or exotic tendencies. He preferred early hours, and while not a devotee of the simple life, neither did he care for senseless gayeties and rackety parties.

No prig was Carlisle, but his pleasures were mental ones, and he got more thrills out of his detective work than he ever did from his successes on the screen. Applause meant little to him, and fulsome praise sickened him. A knotty problem that called forth all

his powers of reasoning and deduction was his greatest delight. And he felt he certainly had a knotty problem in the present case. With almost nothing to depend upon but his own intellect, he proposed to solve the problem of the Doorstep Murders.

His clues were the hints he could gather from his association with the people most nearly connected with the victims. His evidence was facts he deduced from what they said, or, oftener, from what they did not say. His greatest gift was an insight into human nature. He didn't call this intuition or clairvoyance, but merely plain reasoning from indications to facts. He learned far more from a man's play of countenance than from his spoken words. He gathered more from unconscious or unintentional gestures than from the most insistent declarations. And he could weigh accurately the truth or falsehood of these indications and draw his deductions accordingly.

He was convinced that though his power of judging character was a natural gift, it had been improved and expanded by his experiences as a movie actor. Association with men and women who must assume a part, and pretend to impulses and emotions which they did not feel, made him capable of distinguishing between the real and the make-believe in words or actions. He knew when statements or opinions were sincere and when they were false. He had learned to note instinctively the evidences of truth as shown in

a quivering eyelash, a trembling lip, or nervous gestures of the fingers. Also, he was adroit enough to shape his own queries or suggestions in such a manner as to lull suspicion or lead to a desired trend of thought.

Oh, yes, Carlisle thoroughly believed, his experiences at Hollywood had fitted him, as no other training could, to be a detective. That is, a detective of his own chosen type. Not for him the spectacular disclosures of a blue-eyed man, lame in the left leg, whose grandmother had died of appendicitis. Rather, he preferred the positive knowledge of a criminal tendency, or an impulsive yielding to temptation on the part of a suspect, gained by close attention to the witness's words or manners during the investigation.

Yet he didn't entirely scorn what he called dropped clues.

The rosebud on the Carman porch, the watch key near Nichols's dead body, might be real clues to the murderer or murderers. But Carlisle was not very credulous by nature and was suspicious by training, so a clue had to look pretty genuine to get by his sieve-like imagination. In his estimate of a murderer's character he didn't go about carelessly dropping indicative objects. They were all very well in an old-fashioned detective story, but nowadays such things looked more like intentional efforts to mislead.

This, of course, would suggest a clever criminal.

But it seemed to Kenneth Carlisle that if ever there were a clever criminal on the face of this green earth, it was the one, or more, responsible for the Doorstep Murders. Clever, cold-blooded, ruthless, determined—these were the epithets Carlisle had in mind. Not vengeful or bloodthirsty. Terrible though the deeds were, they indicated a willful criminal rather than an angry one.

Straight reason Carlisle was now bringing to bear on the case.

As he sat on his balcony the sounds of birds and bees, the scent of many flowers, the near-by landscape and the distant hills, all combined to make a beautiful and peaceful scene to which his artist soul responded, because of which his reasoning powers rose to their best efforts. Always responsive to atmosphere, his mental ease was enhanced by physical comfort, and the charm and loveliness of nature acted as a real stimulant to his brain.

And now, he had marshaled all the available facts. He had heard all the stories, talked with all the interested parties, discussed the matter with his fellow detectives, and was at last ready to pick apart the tangled threads and try to weave them into a true pattern.

Straight reasoning, he knew, was called for, and straight reasoning he proposed to supply. Yet, as he at once foresaw, this was no easy task.

"I do hate trite or hackneyed clues," he said to

himself. "I have no use for broken cuff links or buttons torn from tweed coats, but, on the other hand, I would like a little something to go on. Something from which I could manufacture a clue or two of my own. Maybe I can find something."

His straight reason got busy and told him first of all that the criminal was to be looked for among educated, or, at least, clever and sophisticated people. The triple crime, whether committed by one or more persons, was the work of brains, not brawn. In fact, small physical strength was needed for those dagger thrusts. The weapons used were so sharp, so slim-bladed, and so dexterously handled that skill rather than force was shown.

Would this allow of a woman's work? Not exactly probable, but possible. A woman, granting she was of a strong nature and unbridled passions, could drive such a blow. . . . Knowledge required? Only general or average knowledge of anatomy, not necessarily academic knowledge. It was horrible to imagine a woman, but Kenneth Carlisle knew that the female of the species could be as deadly as the male, if she chose.

The first thing to discover was whether there was one murderer or more. This was a difficult question to ask of straight reason, yet perhaps that was the only way to reach an answer. Granting one murderer, he must necessarily have gone from one to another of

the three houses between the hours of one and two o'clock. Would he not have been seen? Did Peggy Carman see him crossing the green? Would he not meet someone on his way?

Carlisle answered his own questions. He might not have been seen. At that hour wayfarers were few. Moreover, if he had been seen and not recognized, what harm in that? And the merest disguise, a turned-up coat collar or pulled-down hat brim, would screen him from notice by a passing citizen who was not looking for evil.

No, one man, in all probability, could have passed from one to the other of the three houses without attracting notice.

Second question: Did Peggy Carman see him? And if she did, it was of no help, since she did not recognize him. Or did she? Kenneth thought she did, because of her hesitation over the subject. If she thought there was a possibility of it having been her brother, she would fear to say so. And if she thought it was Rob Phillips, then she would be even less willing to admit it. Why did she speak of the man at all?

Because, Kenneth concluded after some thought, she had deemed it her duty to tell of the passing figure. She didn't then think she would be asked to identify the man, and when she tried to do so, and seemed to implicate her brother or her friend, she became panicky.

Therefore, the man crossing the green had a resemblance to either Pete Carman or Rob Phillips. Yet seen in the dark shadow of the trees, and at a time when there was no knowledge or thought of crime, Peggy could easily be mistaken, and probably was.

Yet straight reason demanded that these two names be filed as possible suspects. As to whether he might meet someone on his way, reason stated that in that case a clever criminal would be better off than if someone had seen him without his knowing it. Were he to meet anyone, he could turn and go another way, or he could march swiftly past, or, if very clever, he could pause and speak to the other, thus daring to appear innocent. Yet the most likely condition, now assuming it a one-man job, was that the murderer met no one openly and encountered no hindrance to his terrible deeds. The peaceful hamlet, especially between one and two at night, was a place of empty porches and deserted streets. Carlisle inclined to the one-man idea, but was willing to consider otherwise.

Next in order must come the question of two criminals. Straight reason refused this theory in case of criminals in the higher circles of life. If thugs or yeggs, two or three might form the gang, but this seemed not to fit with an intellectually planned crime. But thugs or yeggs were barred out because of the very conditions of the occasion. Men of that type

would not use such weapons as the fine and valuable daggers, nor would they leave the bodies without annexing the money and jewelry on them. The three victims had carried a considerable sum in money and jewels, and in no case had these been touched, with the single exception of Montcalm Nichols's diamond pendant, now in the hands of its rightful owner.

Clearly, the crimes were committed for some reason other than gain—that is, immediate gain—and therefore were committed by a man or men who were of the same class as the victims and who for some reason were desirous of being rid of those three men.

Bowing, as was his custom, to the decree of straight reason, Carlisle gave up all idea of criminals from the underworld, or even the lower walks of life, and decided upon a killer or killers of the same rank as the victims. This barred out all the servants. And Carlisle was willing it should be so. They had sized up the servants very thoroughly. George Fox had questioned the Carman staff, Stimson had examined the Nichols retainers, and Carlisle himself had quizzed the help at Danewood. All agreed there was no reason for suspecting any of these, and as there was not the slightest evidence against them, they were, for the present, eliminated.

Then, said Carlisle, to himself, in the pursuit of straight reason, the next ones to be suspected are the members of the families and their friends.

For some reason, he always began his mental lists with the Nichols house—partly because it seemed the most mysterious. To his mind, the Carmans were simple, straightforward people. The Dane crowd he had known for years. But the Nichols household he couldn't seem to understand entirely. The beautiful Phyllis was either a lovely highbred lady or an adventuress, and he wasn't yet quite sure which. He would know if he could see more of her, or if he could see her alone. But so far he knew little save that most of the male population of Gilead was more or less in love with her and that the women, not unnaturally, hated her. He couldn't believe she was as innocent as she looked—nobody could be! But as yet he had no reason to suspect her of being a murderess. Or of being in any way implicated or an accessory. That she was glad her husband was dead, he was certain. Everything he had noticed about her pointed to that. He saw through her vehement protestations of grief, her ever-ready tears, her gloating joy over the fortune that had come to her. He saw, too, that she and her stepdaughter had no love for each other, and he knew they were making arrangements to live apart. . . . Anne was queer, too. She was, if anything, more mysterious than Phyllis.

Well, he must go over there and see them.

But first, a little further consideration of straight reason as to motive, if such could be found.

Kenneth Carlisle was not one to go by hackneyed directions. "*Cherchez la femme*" carried no message for him, and "Find the motive" he adjudged equally futile. Look for a motive, yes. But don't be disappointed if it fails to show up. Your really clever murderer, more likely than not, has an unknown motive; seldom is it obvious or even inferential.

But the question must be taken up. . . . Very well, then, in the light of straight reason, what could the motive or motives have been? He had, of course, heard and read many lists of motives, usually in the order of their frequency of appearance. But he declared the primal ones were love, lust, and lucre. Nor did he regard the first two as identical.

After some pondering, his straight reasoning told him that any of the three could be responsible for the Doorstep Murders. Certainly, in the case of Nichols, the murderer could have been actuated by love for the beautiful wife, or, if a coarser nature, by lust for her. This motive didn't seem at first to fit the Carman case, but, he reflected, John Carman might have stood, and in fact did stand, as a barrier to young love. For he refused to allow his daughter to be engaged to Rob Phillips on the ground that Rob was a wastrel and a loafer. These terms were a little too strong for Bob, Kenneth thought, but they were in line with Carman's ideas, and expressed his opinions.

As to Dane, Carlisle could think of no motive but that of gain. To be sure, though, he was even more opposed to Rob's engagement to Peggy than the girl's father was, for Antony Dane was loath to have his nephew leave him to get married to anybody.

A minor motive, or rather, one growing out from one of the listed three, was freedom. Now, each of the victims had been a tyrant. In each case there was someone to chafe at his restraint and feel glad when it was removed. Nichols tyrannized over his wife and daughter; Dane over his two nephews; and Carman, over his sister, his daughter, and his adopted son. The point struck Kenneth sharply. . . . Three domestic tyrants perhaps put to death by rebellious objects of their domination. This point of view must be further considered.

The possibility of the desire for money being the motive had not yet been thoroughly looked into. But it was not an outstanding proposition. Dane's two nephews, Kenneth well knew, had always been lavishly supplied with pocket money. Also, neither of them had extravagant ambitions or expensive tastes. They had shown little grief at their uncle's death, although their righteous indignation at the manner of his taking off had been all it should be. Laying aside his friendship for the cousins, Carlisle examined their conduct in the rays of his straight reason, and found no flaw of behavior or dereliction of duty. He

felt sure that, save for the horror of the circumstances, both Guy and Rob would pursue the even tenor of their lives with rapidly healing sorrow. Yet this was to be expected. Chummy and congenial as the boys and their uncle had been, they would have freer and fuller lives now they were left to their own devices.

The Carman family it was impossible to visualize as wanting John Carman killed for the sake of the inheritance. Here, too, the expenditures of the family were on a lavish scale and money was always forthcoming and unstinted. No one of the three men killed was ever accused of being close-fisted or penurious. Rather the reverse with all of them. To be sure, Montcalm Nichols may not have given his spendthrift wife all she desired or requested, but he gave her enough! He loaded her with jewels and other gifts, he made her a magnificent allowance, and if the spoiled beauty wanted more, it was merely greed. Whether an adventuress or not, Phyllis was certainly of that type, and beyond all doubt she was overjoyed that her lord and master was no more and she was mistress of her own fortune.

So, then, there was great similarity in the three cases. Each wealthy victim left behind him a relieved household, glad to be rid of surveillance and dictatorship. Each death seemed to remove a barrier from someone's path. No one of the three left anyone who

grieved deeply or showed any symptom of real sorrow.

Yet, these considerations still left the three victims separate.

Who, in the name of common sense, would kill three men that their three families might be relieved of petty tyranny? Who would kill three men that their heirs might have a great fortune instead of the comfortable income they already enjoyed? Who would kill three men that their relatives might be free to make marriages on which they themselves had frowned?

Hard to pin these things on one criminal!

But was it not harder to conceive of three members of these families, like a picked committee, combining forces and agreeing as to time and place, and killing their respective victims?

Too absurd! Yet one or the other had happened. Either one or more criminals had killed three victims at approximately the same time and with identically similar weapons.

Now, Mr. Straight Reason, get away from that, if you can, or get around it—or explain it.

“Well,” Kenneth Carlisle said to himself, after reaching this *impasse*, “let’s do a little of that so-called reconstruction.”

He began with the house where he was. He began with the nephew whose name had been mentioned,

whose motive and opportunity had been suggested. If Rob Phillips had wanted to do away with his uncle, in order that he might have his legacy and marry Peggy, how would he go about it?

Well, in much the same way that he did act. He would hurry home from the poker game, giving his aching tooth as an excuse. He would put in the drops that eased the pain, then he would lie in wait until his uncle came strolling up to the door. Perhaps concealed in the shrubbery, he would spring out, stab Dane, and hurry away at once.

Supposing, then, that he deemed it necessary to do in John Carman, too, in order to be sure of winning Peggy; say, he stopped there. . . . But Carman would be in bed by that time. . . . Maybe not; perhaps he had sat on the porch to finish his cigar. Or maybe Rob had called him downstairs. Oh, well, when you're reconstructing, you can't fix up every detail!

Well, anyway, then Rob went blithely off to the night club to establish an alibi—and did. He saw Guy there and made him promise not to tell, which naturally fixed the fact of his presence in Guy's mind.

Now all this leaves Monty Nichols's death as yet unreconstructed. . . . Well, that brings in your second murderer. Nothing could be easier than for Pete Carman—Peggy thought she saw him—to slip across the green, meet Nichols as he came from the poker party, stab him, and then proceed himself to the

night club, as he owned up he did do. That did not necessarily mean collusion or even knowledge between Rob and Peter, but there must have been some way that the two young men had similar daggers. . . .

Kenneth Carlisle had now spent fully three hours in the exclusive company of Straight Reason, and he yearned for more human companionship. He sauntered downstairs and found Rob on the terrace. A guilty red suffused Carlisle's countenance as he realized the rôle he had cast for this lad in his late drama of a dream.

"Where's everybody?" he said, by way of covering his embarrassment.

"Well, I like that! Nobody's missing but Guy, and why is he everybody any more than I am?"

"Oh, I had the various and sundry detectives in mind. Also, I thought and hoped it was nearly lunch time."

"Lunch was over two hours ago—you missed out on it."

But Rob's persiflage was denied by the appearance of Minor Domo announcing the meal, and with a whoop of delight Kenneth made for the dining room. He was especially kindly and gracious to Rob, by way of salving his own conscience for having assigned him the part of first murderer, but the boy would not allow the intrusion of other subjects.

"What about the case, Ken?" he said, earnestly.

"Now the funerals are over and all, I thought you'd get busy and nail the bad man."

"Not so easy, Bobs. I've been thinking hard——"

"Have you? Then I know you'll succeed. And oh, Ken, I do want you to!"

"Let the chips fall where they may?"

"Yes, yes, indeed! Are you afraid for anybody?"

"You bet I am! I'm afraid the murderer will turn out to be someone of the three families."

Though looking at Rob's face without seeming to do so, Carlisle was all unprepared for the awful expression he saw there.

"Hold on there, Bobs, don't look like that. What the devil do you mean scaring me to death! I thought you were going to faint!"

"You did it yourself! How dare you say such a thing! One of the three families, indeed! And which one, for choice?"

But Kenneth refused to respond angrily. In a very serious tone he said, "Why, for choice, any one but this."

"Then, I say, this one for choice!" Bob fairly shouted. "If any of the three it must have been this one. You can't accuse the two women over at Beaumont, and you shall not accuse Peggy or Pete!"

"Well, well, don't get so het up. Maybe it wasn't one of the three families, after all."

CHAPTER XVII

TIME TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM

CARLISLE was not at all pleased with Bob's outburst and his declaration that his own home was the one to be laid under suspicion. Kenneth didn't take this as an admission of guilt on Bob's part, but he did think that perhaps it implied some knowledge of the boy's that might implicate the other two homes. Maybe the Carman home, for surely Bob would be more likely to flare up in defence of Peggy than Phyllis. However, he was certain that if Bob knew anything he had no intention of telling it, and whatever was to be learned must be learned by the detective himself.

"You're right, old man," Carlisle said, as they rose from the luncheon table; "it's time I solved this problem if I'm going to solve it at all."

"And you'll have to be spry. The powers that be have pretty much decided on Sherrill, and they're going to arrest him pretty soon."

Kenneth heard this with a sinking heart. He knew that the police had given Rob that impression, when

really their suspicion of him was stronger than of Sherrill. He had kept in touch with Stimson and with George Fox, and though the three didn't agree in their opinions they were friendly and tolerant of one another.

"I'm going over to Beaumont," Carlisle said. "I hope I can dig up some information over there. I never saw a case so absolutely barren of straws to show which way the wind blows."

"Well, go along, then," Bob returned. "I'm going over to the Carman house. Shall I tell Peggy she is under suspicion?"

Kenneth looked at him.

"You try to speak lightly, Bobs, but there is a note in your voice that gives you away. No, Peggy Carman is not under suspicion, and you know it, but perhaps her brother is."

"Pete! What utter rot!"

"Well, then, who did kill John Carman? You?"

To Carlisle's surprise this did not bring forth a flood of indignant denial. Instead, Rob Phillips's eyes fell and his breast heaved, almost like a guilty school-boy.

"Don't say such things, Ken, even in jest."

"Jest! I never was further from a jesting spirit than I am now. I'm in deadly earnest over this thing, Bobs, and I'm going to bring it to a finish soon, I hope. I'll tell you plainly that a crime like this can't

go unsolved or unpunished. The criminal or criminals must be and will be apprehended."

"I wish you'd drop it all, Ken. I know I called you here, but I've changed my mind. I don't want the murderer found—I don't want the mystery solved——"

"Because it may involve someone you love?"

"Yes, just that."

"Too late, Bobs. The wheels of justice have begun to turn and they can't be stopped now. If you know the criminal and want to save him or her, better advise flight. That's the only way out."

"Do you mean that?"

"I mean it's true, but I don't advise it. Good Lord, man, do you suppose anybody could escape now? Do you think anyone could get out of Gilead with the mark of Cain upon him?"

"The mark of Cain is not always visible——"

"It is to me. I'm not the blind mole I seem."

"You know the murderer? Do you, Ken?"

Phillips spoke so earnestly that Carlisle looked at him closely.

"Do you?" he said.

"No. Oh, my God, no!"

"The dignity of truth is lost in much protesting," quoted Carlisle, in grave tones. "Suppose you tell me, Bobs, what you do know, or surmise or suspect."

"Nothing—nothing at all, Ken." The stubborn set

of the young man's jaw proved the futility of further insistence.

"All right, then, I'll have to go on by my lone. Where's Guy to-day?"

"I don't know. He was here for a time this morning, but you didn't come downstairs, so we didn't disturb you. He said he'd be back here for dinner."

"All right. Watch your step, Bobs. I mean—oh, hang it all, I mean don't say much of anything to anybody——"

"You old ostrich! I see you sticking your head in the sand! What you mean is, I'm pretty much under suspicion myself, and anything I say may be used against me."

"That's about the size of it." Carlisle grinned at him. "I don't say I suspect you, old man, but there be those who do, so be on your guard."

"Thrice is he armed who hath his quarrel just——"

"Good stuff for poets, but a poor argument for suspected people."

"Well, old Lu Sherrill is more suspected than I am."

"He was. But I'm not sure he is now." Kenneth's eyes were dark and brooding. "I'm warning you, Bobs. I think it my duty. If you're innocent, and if you're trying to shield somebody else, don't do it. More trouble is caused by shielding people than telling the truth outright."

"Maybe so. And I don't say I'm shielding anyone. But I'm not doing any confessing myself. Not yet, anyhow."

And with this, Bob swung himself off down the path to the front gates.

Carlisle stood looking after him.

"He knows," he mused. "He knows something. I wish I knew what. It might corroborate my own fears or it might give me another direction in which to look. After all, it may be Sherrill. He's a deep and complex nature. Seems to have criminal tendencies, and hasn't much moral character to prevent his going wrong. But there's the man Peggy saw crossing the green. He's my choice, and until I nail him and find out if he's good or bad, I can't settle on any other suspect."

Carlisle then started for Beaumont. He chose to walk along the shaded path that skirted the Dane-wood gardens as well as the other lovely parks of the intervening residences between there and Beaumont.

Not at all of an envious nature, Kenneth Carlisle came nearest to some such feeling when he walked through the well-kept shrubbery and carefully tended flower beds of these country homes. A nature lover, he had led such a diversified existence that he had never yet found the time to settle down in a country home of his own. Some day, he promised himself, he would do so, and these gardens, he now

concluded, should be the models for his own place.

As he neared Beaumont, he was thrilled anew by the beauty of it all. Aside from the skill and knowledge of the expert gardeners, perfect taste and judgment had been used, and the result was more like an old English park than an American home.

Turning, he went up an avenue of Lombardy poplars, and then through the rose garden to the house. Phyllis spied him coming, and called out gayly, "Hello, Sleuth Kenneth! And welcome! Come along in."

They were in a glass-enclosed sun room, for the autumn breezes were getting a bit chilly, and Carlisle saw that Guy was there, as well as Dr. Sherrill, Pete Carman, and two other young men, whom he did not know. But a few moments' conversation sufficed to prove that the whole crowd were thinking of anything rather than criminal investigation, and Carlisle saw at once that should he introduce the subject it would meet with no response.

Phyllis, in a striking confection of black and white that had no effect of mourning garb, wore a great flame-colored chrysanthemum on one shoulder, and from her wrist fluttered an enormous chiffon handkerchief to match. She lounged in a black wicker chaise-lounge, with a background of red and orange cushions. Her brilliant little face, with its passionate dark eyes and its tangled frame of wind-

blown dark hair, smiled at Kenneth, and she motioned him to a seat at her side. But Carlisle shook his head, and after a few words he turned from the crowd and walked into the house.

"Is Miss Nichols about?" he asked of a footman.

"Yes, sir. I'll call her, sir."

Anne appeared, looking a bit surprised at her visitor. Sorrow, which had only seemed to make Phyllis more gay-hearted, had softened Anne. She seemed more gentle, more pathetic than before her father's death. Carlisle, with his never-failing tact, opened a conversation and kept her interested at first on casual topics.

Then he said, "I wonder, Miss Nichols, if you care to have the murderer of your father discovered, or if it is not a matter of great moment to you."

"Oh, I do!" she exclaimed, and then, checking her speech, she shook her head, doubtfully.

"But perhaps not," she said, after a pause. "Maybe it would be better not to delve further into the matter."

"Mrs. Nichols, perhaps, prefers not to," Kenneth went on.

"I think so." Anne spoke almost in a whisper. Her nervous fingers twisted the fringes of her black sash, and she looked at Carlisle with a glance of uncertainty that bordered on despair.

"And for that reason, you are willing to drop the

matter. To let the dastardly crime of your father's murder go unavenged——”

“No!” cried Anne, moved by the power of Carlisle's accusing voice, “no, I am not willing. But Phyllis—how can I——”

“How can you run counter to her wishes? Why not, Miss Nichols? You are in no way responsible to her, are you? You have a right to act as you choose, to do as you see fit?”

“Yes—yes, of course—except, that is—well, it annoys Phyllis so if I don't do as she thinks best.”

“Never mind Mrs. Nichols for the moment. Have you any suspicions, any reason to suspect anybody—anybody at all—of being implicated in this series of crimes?”

Anne Nichols gave a frightened glance toward the sun porch where her stepmother sat. She could see Phyllis, lovely, indolent, charming Phyllis, holding court out there with five of her satellites clustered round her.

“Is she in love with any one of those men?” asked Kenneth, straightforwardly.

“Any one? No. She is in love with them all. She is a universal lover. Any man, of her own class, is a target for her wiles. And they all fall right down before her. Her charm is undeniable, irresistible.”

“And when her husband was alive, her opportunities for this sort of thing were—hampered?”

"Of course. My father was not overly jealous, but he had a right to expect love, devotion, and fealty from the wife he had honored with his name and showered with his wealth."

"And she resented this jealousy of his?"

"Deeply. She is glad he is dead. She does not want to learn who killed him, she does not care. She has her fortune and her freedom. She has her life to live as she wishes. She is very happy."

"Did she have anything to do with the tragedy?" Kenneth Carlisle voiced this somewhat astonishing question as casually as if asking the state of the weather.

Anne gave him a quick glance, saw that he was very much in earnest, and she answered frankly:

"I cannot be sure. If I were sure, I would denounce her as an act of justice. But I dare not risk a serious injustice."

Carlisle looked at her admiringly. She had told the truth so plainly, her attitude was so honest, that he could not help commending her.

"That is well said, Miss Nichols. Do you care to tell me more?"

"I don't think I know anything more. I have had time to think things over, you see. At first, I was sure that Phyllis, either directly or indirectly, was mixed up in my father's death. But now I see that I don't know. And even to suggest her as a possibility

would drag in others, and I have no right to do that."

"You mean young Carman?"

"Yes, I suppose I do. He is so desperately in love with her. In all her affairs I have never seen a man more thoroughly under the dominion of a great passion. I am sure he would commit murder at her behest—but I am not sure she did command him. If I had any definite reason to think so, I should certainly believe it was so."

"Let us be frank. If that were so, it would mean that Carman killed both his own father and Mr. Nichols as well?"

"Unless—unless—I cannot say it!"

"Unless Phyllis killed her husband herself."

"Yes." Anne merely breathed the word, so low that Carlisle could scarcely catch it.

"You have some reason for that suggestion, besides her desire for her husband's death."

"Yes," said Anne, suddenly, "yes, I have. Come with me."

Feeling sure he was on the brink of an important disclosure, and praying that the girl might not change her mind, he followed her out of the room and into the room that Montcalm Nichols had used as a sort of storeroom. It was not exactly a lumber room or a junk room, but rather a place where he stored articles or collections for which he had no

immediate use or in which he had lost interest. And here, on a table in a corner, partly hidden by an old discarded screen, Carlisle saw a pile of what seemed to be antique or old-fashioned weapons. There were daggers and poniards, there were wicked-looking knives, there were foreign implements, such as a Malay kris, an Indian tomahawk, and others of which the detective knew neither name nor nation.

"You mean," he said, at once, "that the three daggers may have come from this collection."

"They may have done so," said Anne, speaking steadily.

"You don't know that they did? You don't remember or miss them?"

"No, that's just it. I should say that there were more in the lot than is there now, but I couldn't swear to it. I should say that the three daggers that were used might be three from this collection, but I cannot assert that that is positively so. Therefore, I cannot make any accusation. But I believe, I sincerely believe those three daggers came from this lot of weapons. Who else would have them—three just alike?"

"Why should there be three alike here?"

"But there are—at least there are two alike. See, that pair of small swords—and that trio of poniards."

"The trio are not exactly alike."

"No, but the daggers may have been. Anyhow, who else would be likely to have three daggers alike but someone who had a collection like this? And no one else has a collection like this, or my father would have known of it. He was acquainted with all the antique collectors in town."

"But you are surmising one murderer, then, with three weapons."

"It doesn't matter. If there were three murderers, one man must have supplied the three weapons. I mean, it is too unlikely that three men, wanting to commit murder the same night, chanced to have weapons alike!"

"Yes, that is an absolute fact. The three weapons were supplied by one person whether he himself used all three or not. You are clear-sighted, Miss Nichols."

"Then, granting that the three weapons came from this collection of my father's, does it help you along at all?"

"Not definitely. You see, they could have been stolen by anybody."

"Yes, that is so." Anne looked disappointed. "That is why I say I am not willing to accuse anyone. If the daggers were stolen, there is no evidence attached to them. If they were used by anyone belonging to this household, then it is indicative. But we do not know."

"No, we do not know. But we will know. May I ask you to keep all this to yourself? If you will promise me that, you will be helpful indeed."

Anne gave the required promise, and soon afterward Carlisle took his leave. He did not return to the group round Phyllis but went out at the front door and across the green to the post office. Here he sent several telegrams in code to his assistant in New York, and then he went back to Danewood.

It was only about five o'clock, but he found Guy had returned.

"Too many bees buzzing around the honey pot?" he asked, smiling.

"Just that," Guy returned, frowning a little. "One never can catch that girl alone! She always has a crowd around her, go when you will."

"I didn't know you were so interested over there," Carlisle said, frankly.

"Fascinated, rather. I hadn't realized she was so charming. I never tag after married women, so until Phyllis became a widow I didn't know how lovely she was. However, I'm only one of the crowd. She doesn't especially favor me. Of course, Pete Carman is her bestest. And they are well matched. Well, anything turned up? I saw you hobnobbing with the stalwart Anne."

Kenneth smiled at the adjective, which was surely apt. He had thought Anne a little more amen-

able than usual that day, but after all she was stalwart.

"No, nothing turned up especially. But I can't help thinking Anne rather suspects the couple you just mentioned, Pete and Phyllis."

"My God, no!" cried Guy, shocked at the thought. "Oh, Ken, did Anne say that?"

"She didn't say it, but she hinted it—implied it, rather. And, you know, Guy, unless we assume some outsider or somebody of the gunman type, we have to look to the principals."

"Let's look for the gunman then. I can't suspect such people as Phyllis and Pete!"

"Oh, well, I haven't admitted myself that I suspect them. I incline to the man Peggy saw crossing the green."

"So do I. Now, can't he be identified?"

"I hope so. I'm going over to the night club now. I can't help a feeling that I may learn something over there."

"It might be. I'll go along. Maybe I'll be of no help, but I won't be in your way, will I?"

"You bet you won't! Come along. We'll have time before dinner. Bob's gone over to Carman's."

"Of course he has. Ken, it would be terrible for Bobs if Peggy's brother is a criminal."

"The families are so interwoven in their interests, it will be terrible for all of us if any of us are guilty."

Here's Bob in love with Peggy. Pete in love with Phyllis. By rights you ought to be in love with Anne, or else with Miss Kate."

"Well, I'm not. I'm not in love with anybody. Don't think because I fall for Phyllis's coy glances that I've any intention of cutting Pete out."

The car came, and the two went over to the night club.

Of course there was nothing going on at that hour, save for a few passing motorists who had dropped in for tea. But Carlisle called the proprietor of the place to them for a little chat and they were favored with a sample of a certain private stock that proved very palatable.

"Was there anyone here last Saturday night that you didn't know?" Kenneth asked a little bluntly.

"No," said the man, whose name was Swift. "I never have anybody here I don't know. If a stranger comes we find out who he is at once and act accordingly."

"You know all the girls, too."

"Yes, of course. Good girls, every one of them. Good dancers and good manners."

"Do you know Dr. Sherrill?"

"Course I do."

"Was he here?"

"No, he never comes—or very seldom. I've maybe seen him here three times in a year."

"Mr. Carman was here?"

"Yes, twice that night."

"Mr. Phillips was here?"

"Yes, for a short time."

"Mr. Lawson was here?"

Swift smiled at Guy as he answered, "He was. He was here from about one o'clock till we told him to go home. We just hated to put him out but it was three o'clock, and we can't play any favorites."

"What are you driving at, Kenneth?" Guy said, looking puzzled.

"Just general information. Now, Mr. Swift, how come you have all these facts so firmly fixed in your mind?"

"Most natural thing in the world," drawled Swift. "Next morning, Sunday, you know, I heard about the murders."

"All at once? I mean did you hear of them all at once?"

"No. The news came along in batches. But after a time I gathered that the three biggest and best citizens of our fair city had been killed. And I set about sizing up just which ones of their families had been here. And, as you know, pretty much all three families were well represented. Mr. Lawson here, and Mr. Phillips from that house, Mr. Carman from his house, and Mrs. Nichols from her house. 'Course, too,

I recollected 'long 'bout what time each of 'em was here, thinkin' perhaps the coroner would ask me to account for 'em. But nary a word was I asked, except for some snoop detective who came nosin' around. Not meaning you, Mr. Carlisle, though I hear you're a sort of detective. But I mean the police."

"Well, I guess that's about all, then." Carlisle rose, his fine face wearing a shade of disappointment quickly noticed by Guy Lawson.

"Couldn't make your point, could you, Ken?" the latter said, as they drove home. "I've no idea what you were after, but I saw you were not satisfied."

"No, I'm not. I feel sure, Guy, that the truth is right in plain sight, but I can't see it."

"You don't care for visible clues." Guy couldn't resist this little fling.

"I know it." Carlisle took it good-naturedly, as it was meant. "But I'd like something that would tell me I'm on the right track."

"Right track! I didn't know you were on any track at all!"

"Of course I am. Do you suppose I am an absolute ninny? Of course, I'm on a track, but—is it the right one?"

"Not if it leads to Phyllis Nichols," said Lawson, very gravely.

"It leads in her direction," said Carlisle, with equal gravity.

CHAPTER XVIII

AND SO IT IS SOLVED

THE next day the three investigators met at the inn to hold confab. A room had been set aside for Stimson's use, and he was working away at a lot of papers when Carlisle appeared.

"I give it up," Stimson said, dejectedly. "I guess I'll have to confess myself beaten this time."

"Oh, not so bad as that," Kenneth said, cheerily. "Don't give up the ship."

"But there's nothing to go on. Absolutely nothing. I can't make bricks without straw."

"That's the advantage of my methods," and Carlisle smiled at him. "I don't expect straw for my bricks, therefore its absence doesn't bother me. I've only one bother just now. Who was the man in the Iron Mask?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean, solely and simply, who was the dark, sinister-looking individual Miss Carman saw skulking along the green—if any?"

"You doubt her word?"

"Oh, no, I think not. I think she did see a man—or, it may be, a woman. She couldn't be sure which, as she is so vague in her description anyway. But I am positive that was the murderer. Now all we have to do is to put a name to him—or her."

"Oh, leave the women out."

"Well, I won't quite do that, but we'll call the murderer a man, on the general principle of common procedure. Now he must be identified, and we can't move a step until he is."

"Go to it, then. I can't identify a vague shadowy form seen by a sleepy girl on a dark night. And a night when no one was looking for murderers. At that time this peaceful hamlet was slumbering in its usual calm and quiet."

George Fox came in just then, and flinging his hat down, he threw himself into a big chair with a grunt of annoyance.

"We've got to drop this case, fellows," he said, angrily. "There's too much suspicion of innocent people, and I, for one, won't stand it. I came here and was under suspicion myself at first, so I know how quick you all are to nab a suspect. Now you're on the trail of Doc Sherrill. Have you anything definite against that chap? You have not. He was a weak coward when he sneaked his own I. O. U. from a dead man, but Sherrill isn't a saint on earth, and he's in a mess financially. But he's no murderer."

"Hold on, Fox," Stimson demurred. "You can't say this man or that man is or isn't a murderer. You don't know. Murderers don't wear their criminal traits on the outside, whatever the physiognomists say. And while I don't think Sherrill is our man, I wouldn't say for sure he isn't."

"Well, then," Fox went on, "you're leaning toward young Phillips. Now that's just about killing Peggy Carman. And if it isn't Rob you're after, it's Pete, which for Peggy is just as bad."

Carlisle couldn't repress a smile.

"You're arguing," he said, "that we mustn't suspect anyone whose guilt would cause pain to our young friend, Miss Carman?"

"Well," Fox said, looking a little sheepish, "at least, I think you oughtn't to suspect anybody without some pretty sound evidence."

"We can't accuse anybody without good evidence," Carlisle agreed, speaking seriously, "but we can suspect them, or at least inquire into their actions. Now, as you all know, Rob Phillips is one of my best friends, but if there is reason to suspect him in this matter I, for one, want to investigate those reasons thoroughly and at once. And the same applies to young Carman. If he's suspect let's drag him out into the light."

"Who's your choice for a criminal?" Fox asked suddenly of Carlisle.

"I have eight at present," Kenneth said, calmly. "I had nine, but I have crossed off Dr. Sherrill's name, because I think he is innocent."

"The principals and myself, I suppose," Fox said.

"Not quite. The seven principals and the man who crossed the green."

"Maybe he was one of the principals," suggested Stimson, and Carlisle nodded agreement.

"Maybe he was. Now, Mr. Fox, I suppose you've found out all you possibly can about that man from Miss Carman?"

"Yes. I've quizzed her and she has been frank—or almost frank. I admit I sometimes think she's holding out on me, but—well, who could expect a young girl to say anything that might incriminate the man she cares for?"

"She's made you think, then, that the man might have been Rob Phillips."

"Well, she has, though she didn't know she did that. You see, she said to me in the very beginning that he walked like Guy Lawson. Now Phillips does walk exactly like Lawson, I've noticed it over and over again, but I've never reminded Peggy that she said that."

"Lawson himself would make a grand suspect," said Carlisle.

"You bet," Stimson agreed, "but for the fact that he was at the night club from one o'clock till three."

"Also," Fox added, "that he isn't the stuff murderers are made of."

"You can't bank on that," Carlisle reminded him, "but there is no loophole in his alibi. I've been over to the club three times, and I've interviewed the girls and the waiters and the proprietor, and Guy was there all that time. I've talked to the taxi driver and the doormen, and they all are sure that he was right there. Besides, why would he kill those three people?"

"Oh, Lord, why would anybody kill those three people!" Stimson exploded in wrath. "I begin to incline to three murderers—do you, Carlisle?"

"I can't. I can't set up any circumstances or set of circumstances that would cause two or three men to band together for such a purpose. No, I incline now to one man, and that man is Peggy Carman's dark figure. We must get him. That's all."

"All right, if it was a one-man job, he must have been one of the principals," began Stimson, but Fox interrupted:

"Not at all. He must have been a rank outsider. A stranger to all of us. A man who had dealings with the three victims in the past, who was mixed up with them in some nefarious undertaking, who wanted all three put out of the way and who planned and carried out this deep-laid plot and got away with it."

"Plausible enough." Kenneth looked thoughtful. "But unless he was in town at the time, how could he know just where the three victims of his wrath would be on that particular evening?"

"Oh, they always played poker Saturday night."

"Well, then, can you see a stranger getting into town, keeping hid until one o'clock, and then going swiftly around from house to house killing off each one as he came on his own doorstep?"

"It sounds like a fairy tale, but you must remember, Carlisle, that's what was done."

"Yes," said Kenneth Carlisle, rising, and reaching for his hat and coat, "that's what was done. And I'm going out to get the man who did it."

He went away without another word, and the two left behind stared at one another.

"He's got it," said Fox, looking gloomy.

"I don't think so," rejoined Stimson. "I think he's bluffing."

"Oh, come, now, he isn't the bluffing sort."

"Well, then, he's deceiving himself. He's bent on finding that man Miss Carman saw, and he can't do it. Between you and me, I don't believe she saw anybody."

"I've thought that myself, but after all, what does it matter? If she saw a dozen men skulking along, it doesn't help us unless we know who they are."

"She isn't the only one who saw men skulking

around that night. Some of the servants I talked to saw men here and there, or they imagined it."

"Same thing. It doesn't matter, if their identity isn't known. Well, if Mr. Smarty Carlisle finds out who Miss Carman saw from her window, we may get somewhere. If not, I think the jig is up."

Mr. Smarty Carlisle, walking along past the post office and the Town Hall and the drug store, turned in at the last named, which also housed the telegraph office.

Here he received a reply to his coded telegram sent to New York earlier. The contents of this reply greatly cheered him, and with a satisfied nod of approval he re-read the message:

Yes same day with heavy print letter follows.

Pocketing the yellow paper, he started out again, wondering how he could contain his impatience until the letter promised to follow should follow.

"Guess I'll visit the girls again," he decided. "They may know something about the other chaps."

So he visited the young ladies in Pearl Street, and found a crowd of them together at Maisie Mooney's.

"Hello, my Sheik," Maisie called out as he entered. "Oh, Willie, we have missed you! Come sit by my side, darling."

Forcing himself to meet her bantering mood,

Kenneth sat by her side, and the others clustered round.

"Now, you know," he said, frankly, "I'm here on business, detective business, and the one who tells me the most important bit of news in answer to my questions will get a nice present."

"A really nice present?" asked Maisie, drumming on his arm with her pointed finger nails.

"Really nice, and very nice. But you must be truthful."

They agreed, and Carlisle asked them leading questions that he hoped would bring out some useful evidence as to his suspects.

There was one girl whom Kenneth had not met before, a Miss Netta Rose, and though not loquacious she seemed to be a bit more intelligent than the others, and he quizzed her a little.

She admitted that Pete Carman had paid her especial attention that evening.

"On his second visit?" suggested Kenneth.

"Oh, yes, on his second visit. The first time the lovely lady was with him and he didn't even see us girls."

"No, I suppose not. Whom were you with during Carman's first visit?"

"With Mr. Lawson," Netta said, proudly.

Kenneth had expected to hear Bob's name, but he smiled and said:

"You seem pleased to associate with Mr. Lawson."

"Yes, we all are. He doesn't come often, and he's—oh, he's just grand!"

"Wonderful dancer?"

"Yes, but he was off his stride a little. You see, he—well, he doesn't come often enough to get used to the cambric tea they serve, and it went to his legs a bit."

"Nothing of the sort," declared Jenny Crane, another whom Kenneth had not met before. "I've danced with his Royal Highness a lot of times and he's a perfect dancer. I never knew a better."

"Craney ought to know," Miss Mooney said, "she's a pro herself."

"Mr. Lawson was there all the evening, wasn't he?" asked Carlisle, carelessly.

"Every minute," declared Miss Crane. "I was dying to dance with him, but—well, there were others, and I couldn't get a chance till quite late. But we made up for it. He nearly danced me off my feet!"

"In good spirits, was he?"

"Yes—but not lit up, if that's what you mean. Mr. Lawson was perfectly himself."

"You all agree to that?" Kenneth looked smilingly round the crowd.

"Yes," said Maisie Mooney, who was usually spokesman. "He and I were out in the pavilion, and

I was chilly—I thought he'd take the hint—but what do you think he said?"

"What?"

"Oh, the silly! Instead of putting his arm round me, he said he had an overcoat he'd left in the other pavilion and he'd get it for me."

"And did he?"

"He sure did! The big booby! Skipped to the other pavilion, the little one, you know, and came back with his coat and wrapped it round me!"

"That all the story?" Carlisle's eyes twinkled.

"That's all I'm telling," Maisie flashed back, "but the rest has nothing to do with the case."

"No, I suppose not. But tell me more about young Phillips. Was he with his cousin at all?"

"Not so's you'd notice it." This from Netta Rose. "I was with Mr. Lawson when Mr. Phillips came up to us. He said, low like, 'Don't give me away, Guy, will you?' and Mr. Lawson said, 'Nixy, not on your life!' and Mr. Phillips smiled and went off."

"Phillips was all right, wasn't he? I mean, not too much cambric tea?"

"He seemed all right to me," Miss Crane said, carelessly. "But I had no eyes for him while Guy Lawson was around! I never took my eyes off that sheik the whole evening!"

Kenneth Carlisle didn't particularly enjoy the society in which he found himself, but he had an

ax to grind, and he must keep on till it was sharpened.

He stayed half an hour longer, he chaffed the girls, quizzed them, jollied them, and finally, deciding there was no more to be learned from them, he willingly shook the dust of Pearl Street from his feet and went back to Danewood.

And yet, vague though the hints were that he had received from the gay girls of the night club, he began to feel that he could put a name to the dark, skulking figure Peggy had seen creeping along under the trees.

The mail next morning brought him the letter that the telegram had promised, and after reading it, Kenneth Carlisle came to the conclusion that he wanted no more material clues. Whether or not the man Peggy had seen dimly was the murderer, he now knew who the murderer was. At least, he thought he did, and Kenneth Carlisle seldom thought he knew a thing unless he did know it.

Choosing an opportunity when the two were alone together, he asked Guy Lawson a question.

"Please tell me frankly," he said, with a glance that begged for candor, "when Bobs asked you, at the night club, not to give away the fact that he was there, what did you say?"

"Oh, I say——" Guy began, and paused.

"I know you hate to commit yourself, old man, or

rather, you hate to commit Bobs. But I have to ask, and you must tell me."

"Of course, I said I wouldn't. What else could I say?"

"Do you remember just how you worded your answer?"

Lawson stared at him.

"No, I don't. I suppose I said, 'Sure, old man, I'll keep it dark,' or words to that effect. Why?"

"Nothing. As you say, it doesn't necessarily incriminate Bobs."

"Of course not. How could it? I say, Kenneth, you're not pinning the crime on him!"

"Well——"

"Don't talk rot! You know as well as I do, that boy could no more commit murder than he could fly to the moon!"

"Well, then, who did commit the murders?"

"Party or parties unknown, and that's as near as anybody can ever get to it. Oh, I'm no detective, but I know when the detectives are not getting anywhere. And though I have the highest respect for your talent, yet even you can't achieve the impossible."

"Nobody can do that," agreed Kenneth Carlisle.

The rest of the day he devoted to alternate telephoning and telegraphing to New York City, and just before dinner time he called up Detective Stim-

son and told him he had solved the mystery of the Doorstep Murders. Mr. Stimson was a little skeptical, but expressed himself as quite willing to hear the conclusion of the whole matter. Carlisle then said that if the principals or any others directly interested could be gathered together that evening, he would make his announcements to them all. Whereupon, Stimson arranged a room at the inn for the procedure.

The relatives of the three victims of the crime, also Dr. Sherrill, George Fox, and some members of the police force gathered in that room at nine o'clock, in accordance with Stimson's decree.

Phyllis Nichols easily dominated the whole crowd. Beautiful as ever, garbed in soft filmy black with touches of silver, she sat beside Pete Carman, her great wondering eyes turning now and then to Kenneth Carlisle, whose inscrutable countenance gave her no hint of what lay in store for them.

Anne, distinctly nervous and upset, twisted her fingers continually, and now and then moaned softly.

Peggy, a little defiant, sat beside Bob Phillips, who, white and tremulous, watched Kenneth's every motion and hung on his lightest word.

Miss Kate Carman looked like Justice personified, for her dignified mien and handsome face showed no emotion or even anxiety.

"We are here," Stimson said, by way of introduction, "to learn from Mr. Carlisle who is responsible for these terrible crimes so recently committed. I will leave it to Mr. Carlisle to tell you his conclusions."

Kenneth did not rise; he sat at ease in his chair, and began, in a low, even voice:

"I have discovered, to my own satisfaction, who the criminal is we have been seeking. It is a strange case, and the solution of the mystery, as I believe I have solved it, is not one which can be proved by witnesses or evidence. Nor are there any clues that I know of, unless deductions which seem to me simply the result of common sense can be called clues.

"The criminal, unless I am entirely mistaken, is at present in the room with us. If he or she chooses to confess at this juncture, it will, perhaps, be better. If not, I must make the arraignment."

There was a silence fraught with fear to many present. One and another wondered, doubted, or surmised, but nobody spoke.

"Apparently," Carlisle went on, glancing from one to another, "the criminal has no intention of confessing. I am not altogether surprised at this, for the crimes committed are so heinous and withal so diabolically clever that the arch villain is not only of no mind to admit them, but I fancy he still hopes to refute or deny my accusation."

Another pause, eloquent and breathless though it was, resulted in no speech from the audience, and with a sigh Kenneth took up his burden:

"I fasten these three crimes upon one person," he said; "a master criminal, indeed, and capable of such ingenious plotting that he very nearly succeeded in getting off unscathed from any suspicion. Nor do I take undue credit to myself for finding out the truth. It came to me as a result of chance remarks and vague indications, which, small in themselves, seemed to knit together into a final web of wickedness that is unmistakable and positive.

"The three crimes, committed by one man, have three separate and distinct motives, each strong and compelling to a nature that had decided to stop at nothing. The criminal provided himself with the three daggers of death, he arranged a perfect alibi, he carried out his plans without a hitch, and then in cold blood he murdered John Carman, Montcalm Nichols, and his own uncle, Antony Dane."

Peggy gave a little scream and convulsively clutched the hand of Rob Phillips, who smiled at her through a mist of gathering tears.

Guy Lawson, his always white face whiter than ever, gave a crooked little smile:

"I suppose you are accusing me, Carlisle, but you'll have to guess again."

"No," Kenneth said, coldly, "no, I do not have

to guess again. You killed the three men for your own reasons of greed, lust, and fear. You killed Montcalm Nichols because you desired his wife. You killed your uncle because you wanted his money. And you killed John Carman because you feared he would tell of your past and that would lose you your inheritance. You have for some time adored Mrs. Nichols secretly, but have hidden your sentiment because you planned this terrible means of achieving your purpose. And your conceit made you believe that if Montcalm Nichols were out of the way you could win his beautiful widow for yourself. More especially, if you were already heir to the large fortune that must come to you on your uncle's death. And, too, your craving for rare and expensive books has grown of late, and you are not satisfied with the less costly volumes, but long for what the dealers call the 'high spots.' Your inheritance would provide these. Then, as I discovered through my agents, John Carman held against you the knowledge of an episode of ten years ago. It happened out West, on a ranch, and you were accused of killing a man in a somewhat disreputable dance hall. It was not proved against you, and you managed to get out of it, but Carman, who was the sheriff there, knew all about it, and while he kept it quiet, you knew he would tell, if circumstances ever demanded it. Therefore, you couldn't remove Dane

and Nichols without also removing Carman, and in your black soul there was no limit to the lengths you would go to achieve your ultimate desires. I can prove all this by evidence and affidavits, so you may as well own up, yourself."

"Oh, very well," and Lawson's dark eyes glittered, and his lips rolled back in a snarl from his white teeth, while the single gold eye tooth glinted between his pale lips.

"Very well, if the jig is up, I may as well admit it all. But I must say it was a fine piece of work!"

"Do you want to say anything other than to boast of your clever performance?" said Stimson, thoroughly disgusted with the attitude of this degraded criminal.

"No, I guess not. But I'll hear what Mr. Carlisle has to say about his clever performance. I knew, as soon as my cousin sent for him, I was in danger. Had it not been for that, I could have come through with flying colors."

"I can tell you in a few words how I found it out," Kenneth said, looking at Guy in wonderment at his cold, callous demeanor. "I simply eliminated all the others. It seemed to be impossible that the crimes could be the work of a woman. I couldn't seem to believe in Dr. Sherrill's guilt, and young Carman and Rob Phillips didn't respond to suspicion. But I began to disbelieve in Lawson's desire for a

simple life. I began to think he really was ambitious, even avaricious. Also, I saw he was desperately in love with Mrs. Nichols. Then, his alibi was too perfect. It took a lot of breaking down, did that alibi, but the girls of the night club helped me, unconsciously, of course, and at last I found out the truth."

Lawson was staring at the speaker, with wide eyes and clenched hands.

"First, the weapons. Mr. Lawson saw the lot of junk at the Nichols house and soon after saw three daggers for sale at an auction where he went to buy some old books. They went cheap, and he bought them—why, Guy?"

"Thought I'd give 'em to Monty," Lawson mumbled, seemingly against his will.

"That's what I thought," Carlisle said. "Then, having them in his possession for a time, the terrible plot began to evolve itself."

"How'd you know that?" breathed Guy.

"Simple psychology. You wanted money, lots of money, to buy expensive rare books. Your taste for them grew with what it fed on. You hated to see your uncle spending a fortune for the sort of books you scorned, and you coveted that money for your own treasures. Then, you envied your neighbor's wife. You said little about this, but you felt sure with Montcalm Nichols out of the way and your half

of your uncle's wealth in your possession you could win the beautiful bride you desired. And third, you had to close the mouth of John Carman, for he knew secrets about your past, which, if told, would never let you put this terrible plot over. Am I right, so far?"

Guy Lawson, still rigid as a statue, merely nodded as one hypnotized into the truth.

"But your alibi was apparently insurmountable. Everyone swore to your going to the night club directly from the poker party, and staying at the club until closing time."

"Which I did," declared Guy, "and so all your fine edifice falls to the ground."

"Which you did not," contradicted Carlisle. "What about Lew Miller?"

This pierced the armor of the smiling hypocrite, and with a groan of anguish Lawson fell back in his chair as one without hope.

"Lew Miller," Kenneth said, "is a man who looks strikingly like Lawson. He was made to look more like him by the addition of a gold cap to an eye tooth. And, by the way, Lawson, it was this that first gave you away. You have worn that gold cap for years, and you never think of it, but your double, your clever impersonator, was not accustomed to his, and he fingered it now and then, and the girls thought it was loose. Also, they said you were not

a very good dancer, when we all know you are perfection. So I began to think that the Guy Lawson at the night club early in the game was not the same Guy Lawson who was there later. A change was made—where? It had to be made twice, for you took the taxicab all right after the poker party. But when you came out of the drug store, you slipped among the trees, and your place was taken by your double, Lew Miller, carefully made up to look like you, dressed like you, and who went as you to the night club.

“This left you free to commit your terrible crimes, which you did in short order with the three slim daggers in your overcoat pocket. You met Carman on his doorstep and did him in. You hurried across the green and met Nichols as he came home, and quickly stabbed him. Then, going along by the garden path and hastening your steps, you easily reached Danewood before your uncle did, and murdered him. You threw a rosebud on the Carman porch to incriminate Rob; you threw Sherrill’s watch key, which you had purloined somehow, on the Nichols lawn, knowing it would incriminate the doctor. You accomplished your horrid errands, and then you sneaked the back way through the woods to the night club again. You changed places with Lew Miller when he went to get your overcoat for the lady. Up to that time the supposed Guy Lawson at the club was Lew

Miller. From then on, it was you yourself. Miller disappeared—you, doubtless, know where.”

“You’re too damn smart!” exclaimed Lawson, looking at Carlisle as at a magician.

“Yes, for you. But you’re too damn stupid. You might have known Miller couldn’t get away with it. For one thing, one of those girls told me that when Bob asked you not to tell of his being there, you said, ‘Nixy, not on your life!’ Now there’s no harm in that speech, only it isn’t the way you talk. I knew, the moment I heard that, that it was not you who said it. Then the gold tooth that seemed to be loose, and the poor dancing—all pointed to a different Lawson at first and at last. How could I help getting wise?

“As to the daggers, I suspected the truth and I wired New York to look up the matter. My agent, after much search, succeeded, and wired me that you bought them the same day with heavy print. Meaning at the same auction sale where you bought expensive books. It was those books that made me suspect you at first. In the catalogues of rare books in your rooms were marked items far more expensive than any you have ever bought or could dream of buying. This indicated a hope that some day you could achieve these marvellous treasures. Then, as to the man Miss Carman saw crossing the green. That was you, Lawson. It seemed to her that the

man walked like Rob, and you two chaps do walk very much alike. No one thought of you, because you had your perfect alibi. You depended on Lew Miller, and he did not fail you—intentionally.”

“Who is Lew Miller?” Stimson asked.

“No one you know,” Carlisle said. “He has no record. Merely a man who chanced to look enough like Lawson to make a double for him by the addition of a gold cap on a tooth and little training in mannerisms.”

“Good work, too,” muttered Lawson, boastingly. “Could have put it over all of you if Carlisle hadn’t been in on the game! Miller is a vaudeville actor—or was. He wanted to get out of the country, and he fell right in with my suggestions. And he did it all so cleverly, too. Changed places with me at the drug store, and then again at the pavilion at the night club. Sort of dark, you know, and he acted so naturally and all.”

“Where is he now?” asked Kenneth Carlisle.

Still obeying that strange power that Carlisle seemed to wield, Guy looked straight at him and said:

“He went right off on the train to New York and sailed next morning for South America. You can’t catch him.”

“I don’t know that I want to,” said Kenneth. “He didn’t know what you were up to, did he?”

“No, he thought it was just a practical joke. He

wanted to go to South America, and it was not hard to make up to look like me, especially at the club where there were only dim lights and half the people were loaded."

"And anybody taking him for you would not look closely. I think, Stimson, we are through with Mr. Lawson."

A hush fell on them all as the wretched man was led away.

"You knew it, Bobs?" asked Kenneth.

"I felt when I spoke to him he was queer. Then when he said 'Nixy'—a sort of speech he never uses—I began to wonder. I looked at him a few times, but later on, he seemed to be really himself so I thought no more about it. Want to go home, Peggy, dear?"

"Yes, Bobs." She gave him her hand trustfully as they went away together.

The others dispersed, and Carlisle, Fox, and Stimson stayed for a short talk.

"It was terrible," Carlisle admitted, "to have to show up my one-time friend like that. But it had to be done, and I hope, Mr. Fox, Peggy won't hold it up against Bobs."

"It didn't look like it, did it?" said George Fox, smiling.

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